

Thematic Dossier Decentring Topic Theory: Musical Topics and Rhetorics of Identity in Latin American Art Music

Melanie Plesch

The University of Melbourne
mplesch@unimelb.edu.au

THE MUSICAL SURFACE IS FULL OF REFERENCES to other—real or imaginary—musics. In pointing this out, Leonard Ratner forever changed the way we listen.¹ The consequences of his insight are manifold, overflowing the boundaries of the eighteenth-century repertoire for which it was initially formulated; indeed, taken to its logical conclusion, the idea affords an explanation of the construction of meaning in music that gracefully combines contextual awareness with analytical rigour. Further nourished by contributions from the fields of semiotics, music analysis, rhetoric, and cultural history by authors such as Kofi Agawu, Wye Allanbrook, Raymond Monelle, and Robert Hatten, among many others, the theory of topics (or topic theory) has become an indispensable tool for studying the thorny issue of music and signification, and has even been named ‘one of the success stories of modern musicology’.² Its explanatory power has been applied to repertoires as diverse as the nineteenth-century European canon, the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Copland, Ives, Neil Young, video game music, North American TV serials, and the object of the present dossier: Latin American art music.³

The application of topic theory to this repertoire began in the 1990s.⁴ The initial efforts were focused on the use of vernacular topics in the so-called nationalist schools, and on the establishment

¹ Leonard G. RATNER, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York, Schirmer Books, 1980).

² See Kofi AGAWU, ‘Topic Theory: Achievement, Critique, Prospects’, in *Passagen: IMS Congress Zürich 2007, Fünf Hauptvorträge*, edited by Laurenz Lütteken and Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (Zurich, Bärenreiter, 2008), p. 57.

³ For a comprehensive list of publications up to 2008 see AGAWU, ‘Topic Theory’ (see note 2).

⁴ This includes my own work and, more recently, that of Acácio Piedade and Paulo de Tarso Salles. See Melanie PLESCH, ‘La música en la construcción de la identidad cultural argentina: El topos de la guitarra en la producción del primer nacionalismo’, *Revista Argentina de Musicología*, 1/1 (1996), pp. 57-68; ‘La lógica sonora de la generación del ’80: Una aproximación a la retórica del nacionalismo musical argentino’, in *Los caminos de la música (Europa-Argentina)*

of local topical universes. The topical approach, indeed, afforded a more nuanced conceptualisation of the role played by vernacular elements in nationalist idioms, often belittled in the literature as banal touches of ‘local colour’. The sustained practice of this type of exercise with a view on the ‘longue durée’, however, has clearly shown that the use of vernacular topics persisted long after nationalism—whether as an ideology or an aesthetic stance—was abandoned by composers.⁵ This observation makes evident that the label ‘nationalism’ as commonly applied to Latin American art music has ceased to be effective. While a full discussion of this issue would require more space than we have at our disposal, it is worth mentioning a basic premise: music nationalism as a historiographical category is fraught with eurocentrism. Indeed, according to mainstream historiography, central nations such as France, Germany and Italy have ‘music’, whereas the rest of us have ‘nationalisms’.⁶ While it is undeniable that at certain points in the history of the imagined communities we call nations,⁷ it is possible to detect attempts at identity construction through the conscious use, appropriation or invention of one or more vernacular traditions,⁸ this is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a nationalist stance. It is possible to have nationalism without vernacular topics, and vernacular topics without nationalism. In the Argentine case, for example, most of the composers who embraced the idea of cultural nationalism created works both with and

(Jujuy, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Jujuy, 2008), pp. 55-111; ‘The Topos of the Guitar in Late Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century Argentina’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 92/3-4 (2009), pp. 242-78; ‘Topic Theory and the Rhetorical Efficacy of Musical Nationalisms: The Argentine Case’, in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Music Semiotics in Memory of Raymond Monelle*, edited by Nearchos Panos (Edinburgh, The University of Edinburgh, 2013), pp. 328-37; Acácio PIEDADE, ‘Rhetoricity in the Music of Villa Lobos: Musical Topics in Brazilian Early XXth-Century Music’, in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Musical Semiotics in Memory of Raymond Monelle*, edited by Nearchos Panos (Edinburgh, The University of Edinburgh, 2013), pp. 346-53; Acácio PIEDADE, ‘Música e Retoricidade’, in *Anais do IV Encontro de Musicologia de Ribeirão Preto* (São Paulo, USP, 2012), pp. 296-300; Paulo de Tarso SALLES, ‘Villa-Lobos and National Representation by Means of Pictorialism: Some Thoughts on Amazonas’, in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Musical Semiotics in Memory of Raymond Monelle*, edited by Nearchos Panos (Edinburgh, The University of Edinburgh, 2013), pp. 338-45. It is also worth mentioning the work of Bernardo Illari, who in a paper read at the *IX Jornadas Argentinas de Musicología* in 1994 examined European topics in the introduction to the Argentine National Anthem. An updated version of this analysis can now be found in his recent ‘¿Una nueva y gloriosa nación? Retórica y subjetividad en la Marcha patriótica rioplatense de 1813’, *Latin American Music Review*, 36/1 (June 2015), pp. 1-39.

⁵ Works such *Inventarios Argentinos: Glosario de la Pampa* by Martín Liut (2010), for example, bear witness to the persistence of vernacular idioms in Argentine art music. See <<http://martinliut.com.ar/inventarios-argentinos-1-glosario-de-la-pampa-2010-11>>. Pablo Fessel has discussed the presence of tradition in the output of contemporary Argentine composers in his ‘Política y tradición en la música de Juan Pampin, Jorge Horst, Carlos Mastropietro y Oscar Strasnoy’, in *VIII Jornadas de Investigación del Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte ‘Julio E. Payró’* (VIII Jornadas de investigación del Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte ‘Julio E. Payró’ (Buenos Aires, Universidad de Buenos Aires, n.d.) <<https://www.latinoamerica-musica.net/historia/fessel/sitio-Fessel-LM2.pdf>> (accessed 20 February 2017).

⁶ This fact was already pointed out by Carl Dahlhaus, in his ‘Die Idee des Nationalismus in der Musik’, translated into English as ‘Nationalism in Music’, in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, *California Studies in 19th Century Music* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), pp. 79-102.

⁷ Not necessarily countries or nation-states; for instance, Norway was tied to Sweden during Grieg’s lifetime and the main works by Sibelius date from the time when Finland was still a Russian duchy.

⁸ Mostly from the peasant context in the European cases, in the American continent often incorporating aboriginal and urban popular imaginaries.

without vernacular idioms. Thus, rather than perpetuating a historiographical discourse centred on mainstream models, it may be more fruitful to rethink the history of Latin American music through other categories. For that reason, the theme of this dossier is ‘musical rhetorics of identity’ and not ‘music nationalism’.

The ideas presented here were sparked during the lively debates at the conference *Topical Encounters and Rhetorics of Identity in Latin American Art Music*, which I convened at the University of Oxford in 2015 as part of a research visitorship within the context of the Balzan project ‘Towards a Global History of Music’, directed by Reinhard Strohm.⁹ Some of the articles included in this dossier began their life as papers at that conference, others as part of a follow-up round table on ‘Encuentros tópicos’ at the second conference of the International Musicological Society’s Regional Association for Latin America and the Caribbean (Santiago de Chile, 2016).

A recurring topic of discussion at both conferences was the fact that both vernacular and mainstream (European) topics play an equally important role in the voice of Latin American composers. Traditional historiography has tended to ignore this, considering the use of European idioms as mere ‘copies’ and focusing instead on the presence of ‘original’, vernacular gestures. If we overcome this preconception and explore how composers negotiate both traditions in their oeuvre, a number of heretofore unrecognized areas of research emerge. An interesting case, for instance, is that of the ‘ritual dance’ topic that Paulo de Tarso Salles—in his paper at the Oxford conference—traced from Stravinsky and Bartók to Heitor Villa-Lobos,¹⁰ and which can also be found in the work of Alberto Ginastera and Silvestre Revueltas. Moreover, a number of recurring gestures could be thought of as topics of Europe, or ‘occidental’ topics, to use Bernardo Illari’s terminology.¹¹ Consider for example, the multiple references to Wagner, notably the Tristan chord, in works by Villa Lobos (*Uirapurú*),¹² Roque Cordero (*Tercer cuarteto de cuerdas*),¹³ and Gerardo Gandini (*Post-tangos*),¹⁴ or the B-A-C-H motif, which is also a strong presence in Ginastera’s output: *Toccata, villancico y fuga* (1947), the *Piano Concertos op. 28 and 39* (1961 and 1972) and

⁹ We are indebted to Professor Strohm and the Balzan Programme for the support given to this project.

¹⁰ Paulo de Tarso SALLES, ‘Tribal Dance: A Twentieth-Century Musical Topic and Its Meaning in Heitor Villa-Lobos’s Music’, unpublished paper presented at the Conference ‘Topical Encounters and Rhetorics of Identity in Latin American Art Music’, University of Oxford, 2015.

¹¹ Bernardo ILLARI, ‘Alberto Williams (1852-1962), Occidental: Music, Liberalism, and the Nation in Argentina around 1900’, paper read at the National Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Pittsburgh, 2013.

¹² Mark DEVOTO, ‘The Strategic Half-Diminished Seventh Chord and the Emblematic “Tristan” Chord: A Survey From Beethoven to Berg’, *Collected Work: A Birthday Offering for George Perle (AN: 1995-04363)* 4 (January 1995), pp. 139-53.

¹³ John Edward BRAWAND, ‘The Violin Works of Roque Cordero (Panama)’ (D.M.A., The University of Texas at Austin, 1985), p. 90.

¹⁴ Martin LIUT, ‘Gandini, el tango y después’, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/68266-gandini-el-tango-y-despues>> (accessed 28 December 2015).

the *Cello Concerto no. 2 op. 50* (1981).¹⁵ The multiple Latin American incarnations of the European topic that Ratner called the ‘learned style’, explored in some of the texts presented here, can be framed within this context.

The five articles in this dossier reflect the Latin American reception of topic theory, examining works of Brazilian and Argentine composers from the early nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. *Mutatis mutandis*, each author examines how different musical topics—whether vernacular, mainstream, or both—are brought together to delineate specific rhetorics of identity.

The use of mainstream topics in colonial Brazil is explored by Diósnio Machado Neto, who examines José Maurício Nunes Garcia’s *Sinfonia Fúnebre* in the context of the Roman Catholic doctrine known as *Arte do Bem Morrer* (the art of the good death). Kapellmeister at the Rio de Janeiro cathedral from 1798, Father José Maurício (1767-1830) is regarded as the foremost composer of the Brazilian colonial period.¹⁶ Machado Neto analyses the composer’s rhetorical strategies, which include the use of musical topics to represent the meaning of the ‘good death’. According to the author, José Maurício’s construction of meaning relies on the use of contrasting affects represented through musical topics. He identifies cases of troping, in Hatten’s terms, wherein elements from different topics come together to produce a new meaning that is far removed from the original; for example, a lament over a tonic pedal point that eventually metamorphoses into the drone of a pastoral topic. Contrasts include the use of *stilo cantabile*, *amoroso*, *tempesta*, and *stilo ecclesiastico*, among others.

Two articles focus on the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos, arguably the most famous Brazilian composer of the twentieth century. Villa-Lobos’s masterful synthesis of European and Brazilian styles is indeed well suited to a topical approach and both Acácio Piedade and Paulo de Tarso Salles have made groundbreaking attempts to domesticate the composer’s rich topical universe.

Salles puts forward a tentative classification of Brazilian musical topics present in Villa-Lobos’s string quartets, which he suggests could be further generalised to the rest of the composer’s oeuvre. He reinterprets Mário de Andrade’s and Renato Almeida’s conceptualisations of Brazilian music nationalism in a topic theory key, adopting and adapting Robert Hatten’s framework. Piedade combines topic theory with studies of intertextuality and narrativity to examine how musical meaning emerges in the prelude to *Bachianas Brasileiras* no. 2. He applies his own concepts of *retoricidade* and *musicalidade* as well as a set of topical categories in Brazilian art

¹⁵ See Malena KUSS, ‘Berichte: Alberto Ginastera’, *Mitteilungen Der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 2 (1989), pp. 17-8; also her recent ‘Ginastera (1916-83): La trayectoria de un método’, *Revista Argentina de Musicología*, 14 (2013), pp. 15-52; Shirley Sprunger KING, ‘The Organ Works of Alberto Ginastera: A Lecture-Recital’ (DMA, University of Kansas, 1988); Antonietta SOTTILE, *Alberto Ginastera: Le(s) style(s) d’un compositeur argentin* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007).

¹⁶ Cleofe Person de MATTOS, *José Maurício Nunes Garcia: Biografia* (Rio de Janeiro, Ministério da Cultura-Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Departamento Nacional do Livro, 1997).

music that he has established and defined in previous papers: *brejeiro*, *época de ouro*, and *caipira*. The author highlights how the interaction of these topics creates a narrative that embodies the dichotomy country and city, which is integral to the definition of Brazilian culture.

We turn to Argentina in the next two papers, with studies of less frequently visited works by Luis Milici and Carlos Guastavino. Omar Corrado examines *Sinfonía In Memoriam* (1953) by Luis Milici (1910-98), composed as an homage to Eva Perón shortly after her death. He finds that this work articulates musically a number of idiologemes used by Peronism to construct its symbolic apparatus, among them the palingenetic idea of a New Argentina that transforms the dark past into a luminous present, and the view of Peronism as a secular religion. These are enacted by dysphoric and euphoric topics that replicate the before/after structure present in both the history of the Peronist government and Eva Perón's personal and political life. These topics are selected from a thesaurus of representations that includes both the European mainstream and the Argentinean folk music traditions.

I examine the interplay between the learned style and Argentine vernacular topics in two works by Carlos Guastavino (1912-2000): 'Un domingo de mañana' (*A Sunday Morning*) from his *Diez preludios para piano* (1952) and the last movement ('Fuga y final') of his *Piano sonata in C sharp minor* (1946). I find that, besides the fugal procedure, the composer uses a specific figure that could be considered a subtopic of the learned style, referring the listener to the Baroque organ tradition and its reception in nineteenth-century piano literature, and which I tentatively call 'pedaliter'. This topic interacts with those of a traditional children song and the cueca (a folk dance). I review existing views on topical simultaneity, notably those by Hatten, Agawu, Lowe and Monelle, and propose several possible interpretations linking the topical interplay to the composer's life experiences and ideological views. I conclude that the emergent meaning in Guastavino's case is not fixed but rather an example of Monelle's 'allegory of listening'.

The five papers presented here illustrate how shedding inherited categories such as nationalism and originality can open new possibilities within a topical approach to the repertoire beyond the (still relevant) identification and exegesis of vernacular topical universes. The use, function and semantic status of mainstream topics and the strategies of their adoption, adaptation and re-signification are equally relevant to our understanding of this music. Both approaches are necessary if we wish to grant Latin American music a treatment devoid of essentialism.¹⁷

¹⁷ I would like to express my thanks to Professor Manuel Pedro Ferreira, who first suggested to me the idea of this dossier, to the anonymous reviewers for their perceptive comments, which greatly improved the final product, and to Luisa Gomes for her dedication and patience during the editorial process.

