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*Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and the Ideas
in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (review)

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Reviews



ALEJANDRO L. MADRID. 2008. *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and the Ideas in Post-Revolutionary Mexico.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 210 pp.

Sounds of the Modern Nation is Madrid's second published version of his doctoral dissertation "Writing Modernist and Avant-Garde Music in Mexico: Performativity, Transculturation, and Identity after the Revolution, 1920–1930" (2003), the first being the Spanish version *Los sonidos de la nación moderna, Música, cultura e ideas en el México postrevolucionario, 1920–1930*, which was awarded the *Casa de las Américas* Musicology Prize in 2005.¹

In this work Madrid deconstructs the post-revolutionary Mexican nationalistic discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. He maintains that this discourse undermines the multivocality of Mexican society to favor an essentialized conception of *lo mexicano*, which served the post-revolutionary state's nation-building project. Madrid proposes that as Indigenismo became a central component of post-revolutionary Mexican identity, mestizo and European artistic expressions were increasingly perceived as little more than unremarkable imitations of European art, and therefore unworthy of recognition as "truly Mexican." However, Madrid suggests that the artistic production of this period may also be understood as manifestations of transculturation, in which composers adopted modernist and avant-garde sensibilities but adapted them to the Mexican context. Although this argument has been forwarded with regards to other arts (for example García Canclini 1989, 65–93), Madrid application of this concept to music represents a significant contribution to music and cultural studies. By examining works that lay at the margins of national and international canons Madrid does not seek to "reinstate these composers to their 'rightful' places in the canon of Mexican music [because] this type of exercise would only revive an essentialist notion of what Mexican music ought or ought not to be" (168). Instead, through non-canonical works he explores the values, discourse, and processes at work in the formation of the post-revolutionary Mexican identity.

Madrid's methodology draws from a variety of disciplines. At times the author engages in Schenkerian analysis, at times he reflects on composers'

circles of acquaintances, at times he focuses on journalistic discussions. This interdisciplinary approach is one of the book's strengths. As the author states:

This study of music takes into account sounds structures and the ideas that inspired them, the ideas that formed the frame of reference for their reception, as well as the power struggles that have given them historical symbolic meaning; only [a multi-disciplinary] approach allows us to understand how music articulates and helps reconfigure notions such as tradition and identity. An interdisciplinary study that incorporates an exploration of these signifying practices as well as a critical approach to traditional historical narratives could help us answer the questions that marked the beginning of the intellectual journey that culminated in the writing of this book. (17)

The first chapter focuses on Julián Carrillo's modernist aesthetics as evidenced in his microtonal compositions. Madrid dissects Carrillo's music à la Schenker to show that Carrillo appropriated European ideas in an exercise of transculturation. The second chapter draws attention the estridentista tendencies of Carlos Chávez, which preceded his better known nationalist/indigenist orientation. Madrid proposes structural analyses of early pieces by Chávez. He also comments on Chávez's network of acquaintances to show how this composer successfully navigated away from the circle of European-inspired avant-garde artists and intellectuals, and into post-revolutionary nationalist circles. When dealing with Manuel Ponce, in chapter three, Madrid turns to more historical methods to provide a fresh interpretation of the composer's move to Paris in 1925. Madrid's perspective of this event recasts Ponce's following works as a continuation of his often unnoticed modernist aesthetics. In the fourth chapter Madrid discusses the post-revolutionary government's interest in fashioning a unified conception of Mexican art music. The author looks for the epicenter of this construction in the First National Congress of Music (1926). He studies the organization of the congress, the call for papers, the proposals submitted along with their respective approval or rejection, the subtexts behind those decisions, and the national policies that ensued from this congress. Thus Madrid shows the diversity of artistic opinions and tendencies that the post-revolutionary nationalists sought to reduce into a single Mexican musical style. Through the study of the reception of Ricardo Castro's opera *Atzimba* (premiered in 1900, and produced again in 1928 and 1935) the fifth chapter shows the shift away from modernism and avant-gardism and into Indigenismo as a significant trend during this period. Despite the opera's references to indigenous culture, its reception waned. Critics of this period

challenged *Atzimba*'s authenticity, and rejected the work as a poor representation of the newly emerging Mexican identity. The last chapter works as a conclusion, synthesizing elements from previous discussions and adding the author's final reflections.

Madrid's multi-disciplinary approach broadens this book's audience. Despite the musically technical discussions, non-musicians may still find many aspects of this work accessible. Of the six chapters mentioned above, only the first three contain musical analyses, and only the first and the third make recourse to Schenkerian theory. Furthermore, I find the musically technical chapters well balanced. Madrid provides, for instance, the necessary contextual justification that the quasi-hermeneutic nature of Schenkerian analysis demands, especially when applied beyond traditional tonality. For example, in his analysis of Ponce's ambiguously tonal "Sonata III," Madrid sees a "traditionally Schenkerian structure." Thus he distinguishes this piece from other ambiguously tonal works by European composers, in which Morgan's principle of "prolongation of dissonance"—an application of Schenker theory to atonal music—may apply. To justify this analysis, Madrid shows that the composer himself professed a more traditional approach to writing modernist music (101). The other Schenkerian approach in this work shows Carrillo's microtonality as an embellishment of deeper structural levels. In this case Madrid also seems justified to use this method for two reasons. First, a Schenkerian separation of the different structural levels shows the function of Carrillo's microtonality very clearly. Second, Madrid establishes that Carrillo saw his own work as an expansion of chromatic harmony and a next logical step in the continuation of the German classical tradition. In view of Carrillo's training in Germany, and his conception of the function of microtonality in his own music, finding the structure of his works through Schenker seems appropriate.

Readers approaching *Sounds of the Modern Nation* with a postcolonial perspective may find that the book resonates with postcolonial ideas. They may, however, take issue with Madrid's usage of the terms "postcolonial" and "postcolonial condition" in pages 7, 9, 50, 83, 88, and 102. If we understand postcolonialism as an intellectual movement that reacts to the political, cultural, and ideological legacy of colonialism—which endured beyond independence movements—then to speak of a postcolonial condition in Latin America during the 1920s could seem problematic. Although the indigenist momentum in post-revolutionary Mexico could be interpreted as a type of postcolonial reaction, if this indigenismo developed within the context of a discourse dominated by the nation-state and intellectual elite, as Madrid suggests, then the manipulation of indigenous elements to fashion a new essentialized national identity during this period also rearticulates hegemonic dynamics that do not neatly fit the "postcolonial" designation as

understood by recent theorists (see for instance Castro Gómez 2005, 11–64, Mignolo 2000, 3–28, Toro et al. 1999). In this light, I suggest that in the context of this book we interpret Madrid's usage of the term "post-colonial" as "post-independence."

In the final analysis I find *Sounds of the Modern Nation* an engaging, fresh, and accessible contribution to Latin American musicology and cultural studies in general. The conception of the project, as well as its execution, has rightfully earned it the award it received. Through the study of art music in the post-revolutionary Mexico of the 1920s and 1930s, Madrid provides an interesting case study of the development of cultural nationalism in Latin America. It may thus interest, beyond musicologists, scholars of Mexican history, music, and culture, as well as readers interested in identity and canon formation, transculturation, nationalism, indigenism, modernism, and avant-gardism in Latin America.

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Note

1. Although the book was awarded the prize in 2005 it was not published until 2008.

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