



From the experimental to the ancestral – An interview with Mesías Maiguashca (Quito, 1938-)

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Mesías Maiguashca's artistic and academic experience makes him a significant composer and researcher within the context of contemporary music. From his initial steps in electronic music in 1967 at WDR studios in Cologne, Germany in partnership with Stockhausen, to his conceptual experimental work *La canción de la tierra* premiered in the early hours of *Inti Raymi*¹ on June 21, 2013, one sees a rich journey encompassing a world of aesthetic possibilities, technological resources and principally, transmutations as an experimental musician and promoter of socio-creative music processes² in his native Ecuador.

During his long journey of growth, among many other activities, Maiguashca was part of a group led by K. Stockhausen who, in the 1970s performed the piece *Stimmung* several times; he witnessed the artistic ferment between 1965 and 1975 when the movements *Fluxus* and *Neue Music* [New Music] were the creative and compositional paradigms; he participated in the development of analog and digital technologies at IRCAM (Paris, France); and later, between 1978 and 1987, was a Professor of Electro-Acoustic Music at the *Centre Européé*

¹ Inti Raymi is a traditional indigenous festival celebrated throughout the Andean region on the 21st and 22nd of June (when the sun is closest to the earth). The celebration is to worship **Inti** (the God of the Sun); in indigenous cosmology, the god **Inti** is the supplier of heat, food and vitality to men and women, playing a fundamental role in the existence of the Andean Indian.

² The composer Mesías Maiguashca alternates his activities between Europe and Ecuador. In Ecuador, he has ministered workshops on experimental music and actively fosters the creation and maintenance of spaces dedicated to creation within the musical and Ecuadorian context. In addition, he plays a significant role in defending indigenous rights.

pour la Recherche Musicale de Metz (CERM) in France. Thanks to this experience, Maiguashca became part of an international academic circle, playing an important role as an experimenter, creator and educator, while ministering several lectures and conferences and presenting his work throughout many countries of Europe and the Americas.

But what complements Maiguashca's singularity is his bond with his roots. His work is a projection of experimental music through the local reality of South America. His proximity to manifestations of Andean indigenous culture can be seen as far back as 1971 in his electro-acoustic work entitled *ayayayayay*³, and continuing on to *El Oro* (1992) for flute, cello and magnetic tape, his compositional cycle *Reading Castañeda*⁴ (1983-1993), *Boletín y Elegía de las Mitas* (2006), *Canción de la Tierra* (2011-2012), and his sound installation *Yakushimi* (2012-2013). In these works Maiguashca develops his performance ideas on native ancestral sounds, developing the concept of building sound objects⁵, working with corporal performance and developing creative processes that dialogue with concepts of indigenism⁶ and Andean cosmovision.

Maiguashca represents a unique insight into the meaning of the experimental music paradigm. Going through a generation replete with creative, aesthetic and technical innovations, he reaches the twenty-first century totally equipped with the resources required to create a link between the popular and the ancestral native. On the other hand, he moves away from the established folklore, innovatively and transparently contextualizing various elements of the indigenous reality through the use of hybridity and transculturality that synthesize a creative sound-music process involving the ancestral and

³ *Ayayayayay* is an electro-acoustic piece by Maiguashca performed with recordings of the Ecuadorian musical-sound landscape: ambient sounds, typical urban sounds, dialogues and conversations, traditional festivals and of course, music.

⁴ This cycle was inspired by reading books by Carlos Castaneda on the practice of *bruxaria* [witchcraft] of the *Yaquis* people of Mexico and the first experiments with the world of metal "sound objects" being developed by Maiguashca.

⁵ Unlike the concept of "Sound Object" described by P. Schaeffer (1966), Mésias Maiguashca works to create different sound artifacts (sound sculptures), built with pieces of metal hanging from a metal cube amplified by contact microphones, moving later to wood, using representative forms of indigenous themes.

⁶ Also examine the ideas in BECKER, Marc. "Comunistas, indigenistas e indígenas en la formación de la Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios y el Instituto Indigenista Ecuatoriano". *Ícono: Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, n. 27, Quito: FLACSO editor, p. 135-144, 2007.

experimental. So it is important to understand his ideas when debating the complexity of contemporary music and the crisis of modernity.

Interview

Interviewer (I): From your experience, how do you see the context of experimental music in Europe today, and from this perspective, how does it reflect South American musical experimentation?

Maiguashca (M): In the 1980s, the vanguard of new European music exploded in several directions. The conceptual, aesthetical and technical fronts that would be the future of music have been fragmented. There are several reasons. Certainly one of the most important is the development of new strategies related to digitalization, the diversity of electronic media and the massification of information channels via internet. In addition, there has been an eruption of other forms of thought, expression, content and traditions unknown until now to mainstream Europe. I believe that it is this intersection that will create an important channel of idiosyncratic development of Latin American experimental music.

I: You had the opportunity to experiment and work with different analogical tools developed in Europe, witnessing the digital process these tools underwent since the 1990s. How has this process helped or limited the current composer of experimental music?

M: Analogical tools developed in Europe since the 1950s created several niches, channels and directions. At first, these tools were used by studios and institutions with limited access. Digitization of these techniques and their generalization through the internet, combined with mass education has greatly democratized their use and applications: materials and know-how are now easily accessible. Surely this democratization will create a new moment in the development of artistic and musical creation because I believe that new technology creates new meaning and new meaning, in turn, creates new technology.

I: What are your thoughts on *Fluxus* and *Neue Musik* groups, and how have their processes managed to cross through the decades to reach the current composition?

M: *Fluxus*⁷ provided a space to explore without fear or concerns, but also without much discipline. Its perspective was to question the established aesthetic and technical forms by creating a start-up vacuum, so to speak, from ground zero. Out of this vacuum were born countless ideas, directions, questions and concepts. These actions already implied in the developments that would be projected by the end of the century. *Neue Musik* was more disciplined and pragmatic, aimed at creating "works" and striving for mastery in terms of technical execution, especially with regard to form.

I: In your opinion what is the situation of contemporary music in relation to the range of existing technical and technological possibilities and available today?

M: I believe that contemporary musical creation faces unprecedented historical plurality. But it is precisely this multiplicity that will force the creator towards a long series of preliminary decisions of artistic action. The responsibility in light of such multiple means is equally unprecedented. The creator has to humanly and technically build before being able to act artistically.

I: How has music education transformed with the development of the various techniques of music creation over the last 60 years?

M: The need to renew music education was already evident in the mid-twentieth century in Europe which was mainly caused by the pressure created by *Neue Musik*⁸. The need to integrate new concepts connected to it (atonality, serialism, concrete music, electronic music, multimedia techniques, etc.) created in Europe

⁷ *Fluxus* was an artistic movement of libertarian nature, characterized by the mixture of different arts, primarily the visual arts but also music and literature. The movement was most active between the 1960s and 1970s, declaring itself against the object of traditional art as merchandise. *Less than a style, a set of procedures, a specific group or collection of objects, the Fluxus movement reflects an attitude towards the world of artistic and cultural production that manifests itself in various forms of art: music, dance, theater, visual arts, poetry, video, photography and others. Its official birth is linked to the International Festival of New Music in Wiesbaden, Germany, in 1962, and George Maciunas (1931-1978), a Lithuanian artist based in the United States, who baptized the movement with a word of Latin origin, fluxus, which means flux, movement, flowing.* (<http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/termo3652/fluxus> accessed on April 24, 2015).

⁸ The term *Neue Musik* (New Music) has always been vaguely and imprecisely used in music history. Here Mesías Maiguashca seems to refer specifically to the more experimental and "advanced" European music of the first half of the twentieth century represented by composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur, Luigi Nono, György Ligeti etc. and its current developments that launched very diverse trends.

a need for a new type of training in music. Today there are practically no schools that do not have departments of new music and/or studios of electro-acoustic music. The increasingly intense practice of new music forced the school to offer a specific academic education, creating a generation of artists unparalleled in terms of quality and quantity, which created the ferment required to create and progressively root music in society.

In Latin America, the process has been slower. The conservatory is still "preserving" the traditions of early twentieth century European music, but certainly some, especially universities, are beginning to promote a more modern education that is closer to contemporary music practices, as they begin to make the music school a source of creation and irradiation.

I: In the workshop you ministered "Does musical syntax exist?"⁹, what were your impressions when you introduced different methods of musical structure using noise and free improvisation as strategies for building a discourse of sound music?

M: In traditional formal education the student approaches music discourse through a range of traditional disciplines (notation, counterpoint, harmony, etc.), that could all be grouped under the *Tonsatz* concept (in German, "writing"). But all of these disciplines relate to a specific historical style i.e., European classicism. In my workshop, I tried to formalize functional musical structures that are not related to classicism, but rather contemporary practice, including a variety of sounds, harmonic, non-harmonic and noise. It was important to release these experiences from the tyranny of traditional notation and draw on other types of notation, for example, conceptual, verbal and graphic. It was important for me to work with concrete sound units (not necessarily written) and try to activate them through concepts that were similar to the syntax of linguistic practice. For me it was a great pleasure to see that, based on this method, we

⁹ Organized by the *Centro de Arte Contemporáneo* [Contemporary Art Center] of Quito, Ecuador on July 8 and 9, 2013 the workshop "Existe uma sintaxe musical?", was part of the exhibit *Los Sonidos Posibles* where the musical and academic work of Maiguashca was presented. According to Maiguashca "In language, syntax studies the ways in which words are combined to form larger structures of communication. Does this concept apply to music? Certainly not should we interpret the concept literally. But syntax does offer several formal elements to structure what we might call a 'musical discourse'." Musicians of different backgrounds participated in the workshop which ended in a great improvisation session.

were able, in a short time, to create highly differentiated individual and collective musical experiences and that they were performed in concert.

I: How can experimental music reconstitute the idea of ritual that includes musical experience and how does it dialogue with native indigenous musical forms?

M: One of the features of *Neue Musik* was its exclusive Eurocentric character. All that was peripheral was seen with suspicion, for example, the relationship with other cultures and other ways of perceiving music. In this context, the expression *außereuropäische Musik* (in German, music outside of Europe) was created. But this "outside-of-Europe music" has accumulated its own energy and formed a strong, idiosyncratic tradition, different from European music. In this context, one can see today a move towards traditional and indigenous music in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the experimental aspect of *Neue Musik* created fields of action and of cohabitation with other forms of music making, for example, popular, traditional and/or indigenous music. Therefore, we are developing a broad and promising field of action that could very well create a strong and original "classical" music of Latin America.

I: What procedures were used for the fusion of experimental elements with Andean cosmovision in your work *Canción de la Tierra*?

M: My latest works *Boletín y Elegía de las Mitas*, *Canción de la Tierra* and the *Yakushimi* installation represent an intense and conscious effort to overcome that paradox that has determined my life and my artistic work: to be rooted in two traditions (Andean and European), to be "riding on two horses." In these works, I began to synthesize what I have inherited and what I have learned, since the two traditions are constituent parts of my human and artistic being. During my development I have managed to build something I could call "my own musical language," which consists of a series of conscious or unconscious procedures that I can usually identify with. Once a language is constituted, the next step would be to discover "what to say" with it. The new paradox is that the "language" is intimately linked to the "what to say." I find myself specifically here: making an effort to unify "what to say" to "how to say it". The results have been the aforementioned works. I see myself in them, especially in its contradictions. But they are also part of my journey.

I: How do you think Andean musical and cultural material feeds the paradigms of contemporary music?

M: I believe that every artist carries in his "backpack" vital experiences that determine their work. To the extent that the artist can create strong and significant work, he will be contributing to the building of collective paradigms. Similarly, the Andean artist: if he can, from his life experiences, create a significant artistic repertoire, he will unavoidably contribute to the consolidation of the paradigms of contemporary music and partially participating in its determination.

I: You collaborated and worked with the Bolivian composer Cergio Prudencio and the Experimental Orchestra of Native Instruments (OEIN¹⁰) in La Paz to compose and perform *Chulyadas - Tarkyadas - Sikuryadas* (2011). What were the instrumental, phenomenological and acoustic procedures used to create this work?

M: It was a beautiful and enriching experience. My visit to La Paz in September 2010 in order to better get to know the work of OEIN, was once again a confirmation of my cultural "schizophrenia". The first rehearsals were very emotional and curious: I had the impression that I had already known the music I was listening to at the moment for thousands of years. But after being confronted with having to compose a piece for the group, I felt the need to resort to what had already been "learned". Surprisingly, several of the acoustic characteristics of the group led me to issues that I usually had to deal with in electronic music: the intense desire to leave the tempered twelve-tone system, the fascination with acoustic events such as highly complex beats and differentiated sounds, etc. It was a "horror- paradise" listening to a dozen high-pitched instruments playing *fortissimo* almost in unison in a small rehearsal room! Both a "headache" and epiphany of the soul! But above all, it was a pleasure to rediscover the idea of mixing things up to deal with different *tropas*¹¹, or learn how to record and interact with an out-of-tune organ (a real-

¹⁰ Orquesta Experimental de Instrumento Nativos (La Paz - 1980)

¹¹ The term *Tropas* refers to a set of wind instruments of different qualities and tessitura within a group of traditional highland music. There are several *Tarkas* (a type of Andean flute) that are grouped together to form the so-called *Tropas Tarkyanas*.

life organ of partials!). Finally, I resorted to my known composing methods. Once again, the conflict of "what to say" and "how to say".

Links to pieces by Mesías Maiguashca:

AYAYAYAYAY (1971) - <http://www.maiguashca.de/index.php/es/1970-1979-a/316-051971-ayayayayay-es>

EL ORO (1992) - <http://www.maiguashca.de/index.php/es/1990-1999-a/376-311992-el-oro-es>

BOLETÍN Y ELEGÍA DE LAS MITAS (2009) - <http://www.maiguashca.de/index.php/en/2000-2009-a/480-552006-boletin-y-elegia-de-las-mitas-en>

YAKUSHIMI (2013) - <http://www.maiguashca.de/index.php/en/2012-a>

CANCIÓN DE LA TIERRA (2013) - <http://www.maiguashca.de/index.php/en/2011-a/371-702011-12-qla-cancion-de-la-tierraq-en>

CHULYADAS – TARKYADAS – SIKURYADAS (2011) - <https://soundcloud.com/microcircuitos/ecuador-mesias-maiguashca-chulyadas-tarkyadas-sikuryadas>

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