

Essay review

Alive and performing in Latin America

Silvio Rodríguez – Pablo Milanés en vivo en Argentina. Con Víctor Heredia, César Isella, Cuarteto Zupay, Antonio Tarragó Ros, León Gieco: grabado en vivo en Estadio Obras, Abril de 1984. Cubartista 0024170 Nueva Trova (double album) (1).

Corazón Americano. Mercedes Sosa, León Gieco, Milton Nascimento: el gran concierto, grabado en vivo el 21 de Diciembre de 1984. Tropical Music (Dortmund) 680.013 (2)

La voz de América Latina: Mercedes Sosa live in Argentinien. Tropical Music (Dortmund) 680.001 (3)

Todavía cantamos. Mercedes Sosa. Tropical Music (Dortmund) 680.0 (4)

Tercer Festival de la Nueva Canción Latinoamericana En vivo, Coliseo J. C. Hidalgo, Quito, Ecuador, Julio 1984. Discos Eco (5)

In Europe and America ('the world') stadium performances reached their peak with Live Aid in 1985 and remain an essential part of pop and rock life. In other parts of the world they have also been (and are still) important but their politics and significance differ. The generalities may appear the same but, as the photographs on two of these five records reveal, the nature of the relationship between performers and audience is powerfully different. With a participative force comparable to that of fervent football supporters, the response of those present is not merely to join in songs but also to make statements about dictators who will fall or have fallen, and to offer their own versions of parts of songs that are an overt comment on situations of the present moment or near past. The intensity and emotional complexity of the communication is manifest: what is being exchanged is not merely empathy, but shared experiences and feelings, the private made public.

This response emanates as much from immediate considerations of place, as from the fact that in Argentina (and Chile), during certain periods, the concert has been the only available significant space for the coming together of a certain 'political community' (in the case of Argentina one primarily constituted by 'young people'). It is also inspired by those who come together to perform. On the first two records the 'hosts' are major figures of the Americas appearing outside their home countries: one features Cuban *nueva trova* singers Rodríguez and Milanés hosting one of the first concerts in Argentina at which musicians who had survived outside the country during the years of brutal dictatorship and the Malvinas War were brought together with musicians who had survived inside (recording (1)); on the other Mercedes Sosa is joined, in Brazil, by fellow Argentine *rock nacional* singer León Gieco and Brazil's own Milton Nascimento. The title of the third recording, Sosa's own performance recorded 'live' in Argentina, is aptly expressed by the Spanish 'en vivo' ('in the flesh'): the experiences and emotions that are under constant scrutiny in each of the first four recordings are the implications of being *alive* and *in Argentina* (see Pablo

Vila's article on *rock nacional* (*Popular Music* 6 (2), p. 129)). The dominance of Argentina reminds us that the beginnings of *nueva canción* were in the River Plate area: there was no revolutionary Cuban blueprint, as many instantly assume, and *nueva trova* owes as much to the continent as it does to its own indigenous beginnings.

The pairings and groupings of those who appear together on stage are not the result of stars attempting to cross over or to revive jaded careers but of solidarity, love, respect (motivation not absent from similar concerts elsewhere but having different resonances here) and a celebration of survival and resistance. The nature of this struggle of both 'artist' and audience has dimensions unfamiliar to the Anglo-European benefit concert, certainly those held in the UK and 'Live Aid': when Víctor Heredia sings his beautiful 'Todavía cantamos' ('We Are Still Singing') (on (1)) it is to an audience aware that, like many of those present the singer himself numbers an immediate family member as one of the 'disappeared' during the internal 'dirty war' in Argentina (a situation paralleled in Uruguay, Chile and Brazil).

It would give a wrong impression to leave discussion of this record here, as it also includes many memorable interpretations of Rodríguez and Milanés classics. Milanés gives us his quite superb post-coup song for Chile 'Yo pisaré las calles nuevamente' ('I will Walk the Streets Again'), duets with Rodríguez on 'Yolanda', perhaps one of Latin America's definitive romantic love songs, with César Isella for the seminal 'Pobre del cantor' ('Poor Singer!') and with Tarragó Ros on the Argentine's 'La vida y la libertad' ('Life and Freedom) with its characteristic and emotive use of the bandoneon. As always, the lyrical fragility of Rodríguez' voice is deceptive; its timbres enable him to communicate powerful reflections in the illusory manner of a Picasso line drawing, underpinned by an, at times, metaphorical density, complementing Milanés' more reedy, jazzy tones but no less poetic base.

Despite the size of the event the tone and mode of address of these two major *cantoautores* (singer-songwriters) are always intimate and familiar: it is 'una noche de bellas sorpresas' (a night of beautiful surprises). The last piece, a definitive evocative arrangement of Tejada Gómez and Isella's 'Canción con todos' ('Song With Everyone') alternates lines by all involved. This early song of unity, which creates a physical portrait of the Americas, has with time acquired the status of an anthem, and is also the last piece on Sosa's solo record. It brings together themes found in constant interplay in the songs and poems of Spanish (Raimon, Llach) as well as Latin American (Yupanqui, Jara, Neruda) origin: 'voice/song/singing/wind' and 'blood/river/body/land'.

The recognition of the complexity of *what* has been lost as well as *who* comes through in the second song on record (2) – the palpably emotional 'Canción para Carito' ('Song for Carito'). The response to someone's death is that of a younger generation aware that they have borne the most intense sacrifice of any generation in Latin America – not merely in terms of unemployment and education, but because they have suffered the brunt of waves of repression against 'subversivos-marijuaneros-delincuentes', tags applied by military regimes to justify abnegating the rights of anyone who opposes them or does not conform. The music in these concerts does not therefore 'preach to the converted', a popular but useless interpretation of why such events are important, but rather attempts to acknowledge what has happened.

If the theme is of sharing experience and uniting, it is a mark of her formidable position as one of the world's major (female) performers that Mercedes Sosa

responds to the overwhelming chants that greet her introduction on stage by Brazil's own Milton Nascimento with a reflective and timely new interpretation of Chilean Violeta Parra's 'Volver a los 17' ('To Be 17 Again'), the average age of many of her audience. Her perspective is not that of the nostalgia of age (although as the mother of a teenager herself she does not ignore this) but of the seemingly unique attributes of those for whom their seventeenth year might have been their last, and, simultaneously, of those who have managed to survive – and who, despite the conditions of survival, maintain an 'innocent' fervour in their energy to resist. As in record (1), the interdependent relationship of the political communities is figured in the way that Nascimento and Gieco also sing Parra (the gentle 'Casamiento de Negro') ('Marriage of Blacks') and Sosa leads Gieco's song: the combinations re-affirm mutual support as well as a reciprocal, strong but diverse Latin American identity.

The focus on the public recognition of the private, the loss of known individuals, of friends and family, is balanced by that of land and it is at this key level that these two interdependent themes merge. This is not the tradition of the 'virgin' promised land of immigrants of North America, of the 'self-made man', but of a land that has been since colonial times in the possession of others. The colluding bourgeoisie not only embrace the values and ape the customs of a dominant European model but intend to create a permanent and economically powerful ruling elite at any cost.

The key to understanding the symbols and language of many songs is therefore based on class (as Sosa sings, 'Cuando tenga la tierra, campesino' – 'when I have the land, countrymen') as well as colonialism and neo-colonialism. 'Cio da terra' ('Rut of the Earth'), which ends side one and begins side two of record (2), evokes the land and fecundity as it does the people's lack of bread, and for it Sosa uses the declamatory delivery first heard on the seminal *nueva canción* *April in Managua* recording (see *Popular Music* 6 (2), p. 247). The recurring symbols of so many Latin American songs and poetry are here: 'tierra' (land), 'semilla' (seed), 'trigo' (wheat) and here also 'miel' (honey). The sweetness of life (youth) has been sacrificed on such a scale (not only that of adults, but, as we know, even of children and new born infants, taken and adopted by the military and others) in order that those whose hegemony is threatened by any form of democracy can defend their power and interests. The seed is therefore on one level the symbol of re-birth of the dead activist, on another of the missing 'body', buried somewhere, or rotting on a dump (as vividly depicted at the beginning of Oliver Stone's film *Salvador*). To harvest and to glean each piece of wheat is to pick up the lost, to re-claim and redeem. Not only do the people have the right to life and possession of land but the land is the people: one must know and feel the warmth and desires of the earth.

My research has shown that many concerts are constructed as narratives, and I have begun approaching records to see if they work in the same way, with one text or track specifically intended to juxtapose and comment on another (on Ruben Blades *Buscando América* we have 'Decisiones' ('Decisions'), the perhaps ambiguous 'GBDD', followed by 'Desapariciones' ('Disappearances') and 'Todos vuelven' ('Everyone Returns'). Here therefore, although I have no idea of the event behind the Nascimento song 'San Vicente' as Sosa sings it, the shivers go down one's spine, a lump rises in the throat: one is left in no doubt that loss of life is involved. However, any negative, incapacitating aspects of this recognition of deeply felt and lived experience are put into context and intimated by the alternation between the pain of the initial verse and the expansive vigour of the refrain and later verses. It is because

it is not only a question of survival against the odds but of others joining in the struggle that this can be seen as the theme song of the record. Thus the 'Corazon Americano' ('Heart of America') of the title is ultimately named in the last track as youth, the 'Coração de estudante' ('heart of the student') – possibly lost at San Vicente? (it should be remembered that since the sixties 'student' has been used as an all embracing term to refer to every one in education in the Americas, from primary school to university).

One is not surprised, therefore, that when Sosa stumbles in her translation from Spanish into Brazilian Portuguese the audience have the words already on their lips. Ultimately the whole is fused and loss of life made meaningful in her extraordinary rendering of Petrocelli's 'Cuando tenga la tierra' ('When I Have the Land') (a version as good as the 1983 Managua recording, see above). It captures the characteristic properties of so much Latin American music and poetry: passionate, potent, powerful, formidable in its beauty, ecstatic rather than sublimatory in its re-affirmation of the re-generation of the individual and of individual action and loss within the group.

The music of the first four records is testimony to the transformational relationship between music and politics. This is not merely a world reflecting about itself, it is a world in action as well as one actively healing its wounds and bonding those present in ways both physical and emotional. Listening closely over a period to all these records one responds to the determining moments of creation and of performance. Some of the best music seems to have been born either during periods of progressive, accelerated social and political change (Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Chile) or (often subsequent) periods of oppression, including dictatorship. This is of course one reason for the outstanding achievements of the Allende regime and Chilean *nueva canción* as well as of Cuban *nueva trova*, which itself had no easy ride at the beginning in Cuba in the late 1960s. The music and politics are inextricable, the voice of the struggle is musical. It is for this reason that the word often used by musicians in such periods is 'brotar' (burst forth – again an analogy with natural growth); the expression implies guts as does the emotional content of the performances which, rather than incapacitate, capture the energy of the moment.

The basic flaw of the Quito record (5) is precisely the lack of both energy and guts and it therefore contrasts sharply with the recording of the Nicaraguan Festival of the previous year (*April in Managua*) and the other four recordings discussed so far. The best song is the one which begins the record, 'Solo le pido a Dios' ('I Only Ask God'), the anthem of the peace movement at the time of the Malvinas War in Argentina, of those who knew that the Malvinas belonged to Argentina but who also knew that that was not what the fight was about. Even then I prefer the version on *Corazón Americana*, sung by Sosa with Gioco: the rich, contralto voice of a strong and warm woman contrasts wonderfully with the terse, tight-throated, reverberating timbres of Gioco, while to my (European) ears the use of harmonica strangely evokes the uncynical hopes of the youth of a different period – the sixties and Dylan.

Of the various dichotomies to be found in *nueva canción* the most obvious is that between acoustic (although not necessarily purist) performance and those who also play electrified instruments and thus, to some, come to sound more 'modern'. However, while this tendency has caused much debate but little tension, it is the oral/written opposition which I find most revealing. Many band members write and read music, especially as, in all parts of the world, those involved in popular music increasingly include a generation who have had the chance to study music formally

within the education system and have music degrees. It is interesting to observe how this operates within working bands: democratic collective praxis usually means that a dominant oral tradition undermines hierarchies, and alongside considerations of social and political structures I feel sure this affects not only sound production but sound itself. This recording is overloaded with (dare I write it!) music created and arranged by the head – vicarious involvement – and not by the heart or guts. This aesthetic difference (however metaphysical and dangerous it may sound) seems to me to be an important one in Latin America where, as I have intimated, involvement and experience are real. To act is not merely to risk being beaten up by police and tortured, it is to risk life. In an often Kafkaesque world where the random element dominates, even non-action is to lose life. Maybe it is the way this record was put together rather than recorded which communicates this 'lack' of something: Ecuador isn't Brazil, Argentina, or Nicaragua and, while not without its problems, its history has been completely different.

When it comes to content, the inclusion of a second performance of Adrián Goizueta's and the Grupo Experimental de Costa Rica's 'Eugenia' is hard to understand as the performance on *April in Managua* is good enough. It may be unfair but the thought occurs that perhaps Goizueta has only one good song. Certainly, in a concert in London in 1985 with the excellent Luís Enrique Mejía Godoy and Amparo Ochoa, his best offerings were covers. I must admit an antipathy to what for me is a problem group – the only one including itself as part of the *nueva canción* movement, to my knowledge, to use music stands and scores on stage, to look at what they are supposed to play not at who they are playing to (all members of the group, I believe, are conservatoire trained). Even groups who do use scores for some of their repertoire (for example Chileans Quilapayún) learn everything 'by heart'. It may be characteristic of the brass sections of *salsa* and latin jazz bands but seems contradictory practice for musicians who claim to be part of a movement whose beginnings lie back in roots traditions and whose priority is direct communication. An added problem, for me, is that the song 'Eugenia' is flawed by the patronising tone of the outsider.

I also dislike the heavy version of Gabino Palomares' unique 'Maldición de Malinche' ('Curse of Malinche'), surely one of the most important songs of the Americas. Palomares' own pared down version on the Managua LP with Amparo Ochoa as second voice is sheer joy, evoking the inner core of the amplified and early definitive version made in Mexico by Amparo Ochoa herself with the Folkloristas: that arrangement cleverly matches the progressive musical sections to represent pre- and post-conquest periods in sound, implying the rural-urban racial tensions. The Quito version by Los Folkloristas turns it into an unsuccessful deadly 'cantata'-like folk mass (modelled perhaps on the successful Quilapayún 'Cantata Santa Maria de Iquique' which it seems to reference directly in its use of flute and other tell-tale borrowings). The arrangement is overdone, ruins the song, obscures, nay removes its guts. On the whole that is the essential problem of much to be found on this record. Even Holly Near's piece draws the response 'nice try, Holly', but too much heart-on-sleeve, too direct and obvious an idiom, one that flagrantly ignores the poetic and metaphoric level of the majority of Latin American *nueva canción*.

This disappointing record is not even redeemed by the few good songs. I had hoped to find a unique live recording of Inti-Illimani with Patricio Manns as it was reported that they performed 'La muerte no va conmigo' ('Death Does Not Go With Me', see *Popular Music* 6 (2), p. 249). Its omission may simply be due to a poor

recording: the people's response to the Intis' italianate 'Mercado Testaccio' gives weight to the suspicion that they have developed into one of Latin America's best loved groups, with their belief that it is attention to the tiny delicate details of pieces as well as to major elements by which they can both be finally represented and transcend their exile.

The other convincing performance is that of Silvio Rodríguez. I tend to read the vulnerability of Rodríguez's voice as a metaphor for the sustaining strength of feeling and belief in what lies inside the Cuban Revolution and of the commitment of a child of that revolution; a voice that is foil to the physicality, dogmatism and rhetoric of Fidel. His enormous productivity, his appeal across age groups and genres within the Spanish-speaking world, are matched by the comparable output and impact of Pablo Milanés; together they form the tip of the gifted generation of the Cuban revolution. This returns us to where I began, with the Argentine recording, still definitively the best record of the last few years: its warmth, humour, love and affection are part of a moment of history. It isn't only a matter of saying that to find the real history of the people, listen to their records, especially their live performances; it is 'que la cultura ya sea diferente' ('that culture may now be different').

Those of us outside the Americas who track down and listen to these recordings in our own homes have a record of something that, at one level, we can only be privy to as auditory voyeurs. Our response, primarily activated at the emotional and emphatic level, can best be understood as part of a classic interior/exterior dialogue and axis, and thus of a fundamentally necessary rearguard of support for Latin American resistance and solidarity, the key to much of the politics of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Jan Fairley

Edinburgh