

Guarania: Intangible Heritage and National Identity in Paraguay

Antonio V. Pecci⁹¹

Guarania

Guarania, a musical genre, is the living expression of the Paraguayan culture. It was created at the beginning of the 20th century by the musician José Asunción Flores.⁹² He created this genre foreseeing to transmit the national “teko” (the national being and the national feeling), through the harmonization of the writing and interpretation of native and popular music. Guarania was adopted and enriched by other creators and interpreters, becoming a collective expression of Paraguayan society.

This music is characterized by a slow tempo (6/8), on a set of sophisticated melodies and a harmonic variety. The Guarania’s basic rhythmic configuration finds its origins on the Paraguayan polka. This musical genre was created in Paraguay in the 19th century and it’s characterized by an overlapping binary compass that is composed above the lines of the singing and the strumming of the guitar, on a ternary base entrusted to the double bass (when this one is used in the instrumentation).

Simultaneously, the line of the song, besides containing hemiolas⁹³ that sometimes configure an eventual ternary compass, comprise syncopations⁹⁴ that dislocate and advance the initial strong beats of the measures. Moreover, the Guarani language is used as a vehicle.

Thus, sonority and cadence, which captures the “ka’aru ha techaga’u” (sunset filled with longing), that emerges with a “sapukai soro” (heartbreaking cry), that releases the “anga” (soul), are projected in Guarania.

91 Journalist specialized in cultural issues and writer. E-mail: antoniopeccipy@yahoo.com.

92 He was born in Asunción, Paraguay, on August 27, 1904, and died in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on May 16, 1972.

93 In rhythm, hemiola refers to three beats of equal value in the time normally occupied by two beats.

94 Syncopation is a rhythmic technique in music where emphasis is placed on off-beat or unexpected beats within a musical phrase.

A glance to the work of José Asunción through time

The “Week of the Guarania” is organized every year in Paraguay. During this celebration various commemorations are planned to pay tribute to the creator of Guarania. And to commemorate his birth that took place in the humble neighborhood of Punta Karapâ, in Asuncion, on August 27th, 1904. Declared by the National Parliament as a Cultural Heritage of Paraguay in 2010, this musical genre was intended to be nominated as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, at UNESCO.

How representative is Guarania for Paraguay? How does it contribute to the Paraguayan cultural identity? On the way to the celebration of the centenary of the Guarania creation, what is the current condition of this musical genre created in 1925? There are various theories or urban legends that do not correspond to reality. However, these rumors are still spreading. For this reason, it is essential to analyze the evolution of this musical genre, starting from the beginning of the 20th century and including the new expressions of the 21st century.

José Asunción Flores was criticized for his excessive attachment to the popular sources of the country’s folklore. His transition to the symphonic field was a controversial subject. However, he intended to elevate Guarania, embracing this decision, so it could figure in the repertoire of classical or scholarly works.

The educated elite of the country, at the beginning of the new rhythm, between the decades of 1920 and 1930, questioned the fact that a young musician of popular origin could create a new rhythm, especially because it was based on popular themes, as well as non-traditional forms, and not on European models. This led to the publication of articles that criticized him personally as well as his work.

Several sources confirm that these criticisms, made mainly by a musician who used to sign with the pseudonym ‘Smerdiakoff’, troubled the young member of the Police Band.⁹⁵ A group of colleagues encouraged José Asunción Flores to continue creating. Poets, and journalists, such as Herib Campos Cervera, Facundo Recalde and Manuel Ortíz Guerrero wrote articles supporting him. For example, around year 1930, Ortíz Guerrero wrote an article in *El Diario* titled “Greeting to José Asunción Flores” in which he argued about the possibility that someone who ‘emerged from the yuyal’ (yuyal: weeds) could contribute something new to the musical art. The poet from Guairá had moral authority and considerable artistic weight since he was the one who consolidated the figure of the writer at a social level. Additionally, his poetic work had a wide circulation.

The support given to this paradigmatic figure and, on the other hand, the criticism towards power, were important. This was not only to advocate for the young and emerging

95 He was interested in music in his childhood and since that time, joined the “Capital Police Band.”

figure but also to uphold an entire lineage of popular culture. It had been ignored by the upper classes, who used to have French culture and transpositions from Buenos Aires as references. The bourgeoisie was interested in paintings, dresses, dishes, books, and much of the Parisian cultural baggage. There was a very little contribution to the creation of conservatories, orchestras, and theaters at the local level. Unlike the economic elites of other cities such as Buenos Aires, Rosario, Córdoba, and Santiago de Chile. They used to promote the creation of conservatories, theaters, repertoires, and visits from foreign companies.

Guarania was then a challenge to that worldview because it presented a new form and an accessible language. In addition, topics related to the suffering 'mensú' of the yerba mate fields, the figure of the workers and indigenous peoples. Through slow and nostalgic melodies, at times vibrant, Guarania vindicated the Guarani language and the role of women. What did it mean? This meant that a good musician had to devote himself to creating waltzes, sonatas, concertos for violin and piano, inspired by the great European masters in their form and content.

Agustín Pío Barrios (San Juan Bautista, 1885 - San Salvador, 1944), the great classical guitar composer, was also not forgiven for using popular sources as inspiration, in Paraguay and in Latin America. According to the notable guitarist John Williams, this explains why his creations were marginalized from the international repertoire during decades.

Identity data

Edgar Valdes, a literary critic, and close friend of José Asunción Flores declared:

...Flores melodies are deeply penetrating because they go deep into our sensitivity. There are pains, sufferings, and hopes of such a nature that they cannot be expressed with means as crude as words. In the case of Paraguayans, this is even more evident because our entire history is nothing but a history of disasters, of promises of fullness that were never fulfilled (...) Only great thinkers like Barrett or artists like Flores could reach the deepest part of the collective unconscious. Maybe it is here the origin of his creations and that's why Barrett saw us as the most unfortunate people on Earth. Meanwhile Flores' music expresses melancholy, nostalgia, the notion of a lost paradise that always accompanies us.

Carlos Villagra Marsal, one of the prominent scholars of our roots, affirmed that Paraguayan culture was based on three elements: the Hispano-Guarani mixed race, the Guarani language, and in the musical field, the Guarania. Elvio Romero added that these three components give cultural homogeneity to the country, this allows these artistic expressions to have a national impact. Unlike neighboring countries, which had regional folklore that differs in each area.

The Paraguayan musician Luís Szarán says that the awareness of a national sentiment began precisely with Agustín Pio Barrios, who was leaning towards the guitar. He dedicated a small percentage of his production to this movement, as in “Danza Paraguaya”. Subsequently, the movement was defined and strengthened by Flores whose leadership managed to awaken the awareness and sensitivity of his contemporaries.

From then on and well into the 1970s, no other form of musical expression will be known. The generation that preceded this group has not produced a single first-rate work, in which the characteristics of nationality are found (...). From the humble space, under a mango tree, in the Police Band, and even in the highest artistic circles in Moscow, he instilled in his contemporaries a taste for artistic forms and showed them the ways through understanding popular expressions. (...) Flores used to say that “every element taken from popular expressions, and life itself, has a principle of universality.

Timeless music

The musician Oscar Cardozo Ocampo declared in a conversation held in 1995:

I consider that Flores’ work represents, in my view, the work of a genius. However, I think that lately the noun genius has been used very irresponsibly. It is very easy to say, this guy is a genius. Still, what is the real meaning of being a genius? This is a phenomenon that arises in areas that do not meet the appropriate conditions. The case of Flores is an example. He was born in Paraguay at the beginning of the 20th century, in an environment that did not provide him adequate opportunities to receive good instruction. However, the lifestyle of Barrios, who belongs to this same category, was different.

Despite all those obstacles, the talent of Flores emerged. From the arrangement he makes of Ma’erāpa reikuaase, – said the renowned musician – he lays the foundations and marks the way so that other talented Paraguayan musicians can reach their full potential. I reserve this category of genius only for Flores. His work has the validity of the brilliant and goes beyond the transformation of time. It has the magnificence and simplicity of being understandable and perceptible in its beautiful aesthetics by any country in the world. José Asunción Flores’ melody has an aesthetic forcefulness that goes far beyond words, languages, and information. For me it goes to the noblest and deepest feelings. For this reason, it is timeless and is situated anywhere in the world.

The Symposium on Guaranía, organized in November 2023, was an opportunity to share perspectives and approaches aiming to revalue this artistic legacy that is highly important for the country. For this reason, this musical genre is intended to be inscribed on

the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO. Following the example of tango, and more recently, of the chamamé.

The extraordinary contribution of José Asunción Flores was the creation of a new musical genre. This issue must be reevaluated by the country, considering the musical model created. Furthermore, also considering the context in which Flores composed a set of popular and symphonic works that continue to influence our sensitivity and allow new readings. This reevaluation could consider the set of his popular works such as 'Arribeño resay' ('Tears of an Arribeño'), 'Ka'aty' ('Yerbal'), 'Gallito cantor', 'Ne rendápe aju' ('I come next to you') and his symphonic poems like 'Mburicao' ('Dance of the Water'), 'Guyrau' ('Black Thrush'), 'India', a piece for ballet; 'Pyhare pyte' ('Deep Night') and his great song in favor of universal fraternity and against war, 'María de la Paz', inspired by the tragedy of the nuclear bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

For decades he was banned by his country's authoritarian regimes due to his socialist ideals and his fight for the freedom of political prisoners. Though, he managed to have all his popular works and his eleven poems performed in concerts and recorded on disc during his life. This is a unique case in the musical history of Paraguay.

His autobiographical texts were rescued this year. They were written in the last stage of his life, in the middle of a very serious illness. These texts were published under the title "Memories" of José Asunción Flores, edited by Alcibíades González Delvalle and the journalist Antonio V. Pecci, author of this article. In this work, he refutes the attack of the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) that launched a campaign denying him the paternity of Guaranía. However, simultaneously, he offers insights into the creation process of the new musical genre, outlining its defining stages and roots. Additionally, he addresses the challenge that composers of this genre faced in elevating Paraguayan music and its contributions to the symphonic level.

The distinguished novelist Augusto Roa Bastos, Cervantes Prize 1989, a close friend of the musician and companion in exile for many years in the Argentine capital would say:

Flores is an exceptional man, although this word is very worn out (...) He is a man who made himself. Is one of the few Paraguayans that I have seen forge himself through his talent, his will, his intuition of the human condition. He was also a kind of permanent glow of vital joy.