

**‘From Santiago de Cuba with Love’: The Bolero as an Early Example of Cultural and Economic Globalisation.**

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The emergence of globalised popular culture is commonly perceived as a late twentieth century phenomenon. However, the incursion of popular Latin music into other markets can clearly be traced back to the early-mid twentieth century. This paper will examine the development of the bolero song genre as an example of a transnational cultural product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From its Cuban origins the bolero spreads throughout Latin America and beyond to the U.S.A., Europe and Asia. This is a crucial moment of power for the mass media as the development of popular urban mass culture supplied a means of mediating the fragmentation associated with modern social structures. The bolero song genre paradoxically appeals simultaneously to a nostalgic discourse of loss and longing whilst being orientated to the future as a product of the modern imagination through its urbane and cosmopolitan sound. It is pivotal to the evolution of an urban sensibility tied in to modernity and modernization through the development of the mass media of the time: radio, the recording industry and film.

Some of the issues I will briefly address today are:

- Reasons for the extraordinary mobility of the bolero (musical, discursive and commercial)
- Authenticity, hybridity, transculturation and multidirectional flows of influence
- Interaction of the local, national and transnational

In conclusion, the continued success of the bolero in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the billboard success of young artists such as Los Tri-O will be considered in relation to the concept of active nostalgia.

Ningún género de la música popular de nuestra América se ha arraigado, propagado y conservado con tanta fortaleza como el bolero. Desde el Nueva York latino a las repúblicas australes, se ha prodigado el género romántico con una persistencia admirable. (Pagano 1995: 11)

The bolero can be considered the most popular romantic rhythm of the twentieth century both in Spanish America and Spain where it was primarily popularized by the singer Antonio Machín in the 1940s. From its origins in Cuba (of which more later) it spread throughout the Spanish Caribbean and the continent, rapidly crossing frontiers through the new media of radio, film, and an emerging record industry, as well as extensive tours by the most popular artistes. The first registered example of a Cuban bolero dates from 1883: 'Tristezas' by the *trovador* José (Pepe) Sánchez, a mulatto tailor from Santiago. That is not to say that boleros were not being composed before this date. In all likelihood they date from the mid to late nineteenth century as part of the *trova* complex. As Leonardo Acosta notes in an article on the myth making around the invention of new rhythms, many of the composers involved couldn't write music and therefore didn't transcribe and register their compositions (2000a: 11). Works were often premiered in private functions or *peñas* at which various artists would be present.

The Cuban bolero shares only its name with its Spanish homonym. It is a duple metre song and originally had a strict rhythmic base, the 'cinquillo cubano' (again of which more later) comprised of a group of syncopated notes forming five beats of note value long-short-long-short-long usually followed by non-syncopated notes. This alternation, which can be traced back to African (Yoruba) drumming patterns, was originally played on the 'clave' (a pair of hard wooden sticks struck together) and the bolero has been described as the first great Afro-Hispanic vocal synthesis by the composer Rosendo Ruiz Quevedo due to its combination of singing in the style of French romances and Italian 'bel canto', Spanish Moorish guitars, and Afro-Cuban Percussion (1988: 5). As the bolero has developed the hegemony of this strict rhythmic patterning has been replaced by freer rhythms that follow the prosody of the lyrics. (Some commentators identify the key moment as 1929 with the composition of "Aquellos ojos verdes" by Nilo Menéndez influenced by French impressionistic

harmonies and jazz.) The move away from simple guitar accompaniment to the use of orchestras and big bands has paradoxically served to place increased emphasis on the vocality of the performer who becomes the focal point for audience identification. Love in its multiple variations, both affirmative and negative, is the predominant (although not the only) theme of the bolero.

Over the course of the twentieth century the bolero has been transformed into a transnational phenomenon. Cuban composer and researcher Rosendo Ruiz Quevedo has stated that it constitutes more than a national patrimony. It is a shared cultural patrimony of the Caribbean and Latin America (1988: 5). For the Venezuelan researcher José García Marcano the bolero is a shared heritage and taste that all Spanish Americans supposedly share (1994: vii). General studies of the genre by Cuban musicologist Helio Orovio (1995) or the Colombians Hernán Restrepo Duque (1992) and Jaime Rico Salazar (2000) have demonstrated the rich variety of the bolero throughout the Americas.

There are many factors to consider in accounting for the extraordinary mobility of the genre. Cuban musicologist José Loyola Fernández focuses on its binary and polyrhythmic nature that have facilitated fusions with a wide variety of vocal and instrumental forms (1997: 21-22). The indeterminacy of bolero lyrics have also contributed to the fluidity of the form, the looseness of reference of romantic lyrics making them especially widely accessible. With notable exceptions (such as the Puerto Rican boleros of nostalgia for the homeland) bolero lyrics, as opposed to ballads, tend not to have a narrative format preferring to focus on a particular emotion. On the whole lyrics consist of impersonal dialogues between an 'I' and an un-named 'you'. These semiotic shifters change meaning according to the identifications of the composer, audience and individual listener. The listener can identify with the singing 'I' or the 'you' to whom the song is addressed. In the latter case a double identificatory logic operates by which the listener is on the one hand made to feel special or unique whilst on the other implicitly belonging to a community of other 'yous' who share the same desires, illusions and frustrations. Boleros act as a kind of polysemic 'collective palimpsest' upon which individual desires are articulated through the dynamic experience of listening (Leal

1992: 41). (Another factor to be considered would be why Romantic discourse persists in Latin America.)

The cultural conditions of production and consumption also need to be taken into account when considering why the bolero and not other genres spread so rapidly throughout the continent. It is no coincidence that its success coincided with the emergence of the new mass media such as radio, recording, cinema (particularly in Mexico) and later TV. In order to consolidate their market position the large recording studios such as Edison, Víctor and Columbia needed cultural products that crossed boundaries easily whilst being adaptable to local markets. The bolero had the advantage of already being relatively well known, particularly in the Caribbean crucible, through the tours of Cuban revues and circuses. Not only that, it is not easily delimited in terms of social or cultural demographics, in other words it had the advantage of appealing across races, social classes and genders. It would seem to provide a common yet differentiated cultural space in which a multitude of communities and publics can locate themselves in imaginary cultural narratives through material experience.

Returning to the question of origins... This has been an area of some dispute. Ill informed writers who have ascribed the creation of the genre to one of its most famous popularisers, the Mexican composer Agustín Lara, have provoked furious responses from Cuban composers, musicologists and cultural commentators including the composition of the bolero 'Soy muy cubano' by Alberto Villalón in 1949. However, as Acosta provocatively suggested in his paper at the 1990 Havana International Symposium on the bolero, perhaps there is some truth in the designation of the bolero as a Caribbean genre, the Caribbean being understood as 'una extensión que sobrepasa la acepción puramente geográfica o política, étnica o lingüística' (2000b: 115). Its origins seem to trouble easy narratives of authenticity, instead invoking hybridity and dialogic syncretism. The so-called 'cinquillo cubano', for example, arrives in Oriente from Saint Domingue when the slaves arrived with their masters fleeing the revolution of 1791-1804. It forms part of the *tumba francesa*. According to the Cuban musicologist, Argeliers León, the mix of strumming and plucking in the

guitar accompaniment of the bolero is typical of the Yucatecan *son* and is probably Mexican in origin, given the close links between Cuba and the Yucatan province in the nineteenth century (1984: 210-11). A number of critics have focused on the bolero within the more reduced area of the Caribbean and it is certain that from Cuba it first spread to the neighbouring shores of Mexico, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic in the late nineteenth century through the travels of various composers and performers, which again raises questions about mutual influences between musical genres. Furthermore these are the key countries for the development of the genre. If Cuba is the country of origin of the bolero, Mexico is its adoptive homeland from which it was disseminated through the mass media, particularly radio and cinema. It was radio rather than records that initially facilitated the immediate spread of popular songs throughout the continent, as artists would copy down the lyrics and melodies of songs that they heard. For example in 1937 the singer Pedro Vargas and pianist Pepe Agüeros heard Gonzalo Curiel's 'Vereda Tropical' on the radio whilst on tour in Caracas and the next day they premiered the song in Venezuela. Crooners as far afield as Argentina and Chile copied the style of Mexican tenors such as Juan Arvizu, Alfonso Ortiz Tirado and Pedro Vargas. Commercial jingles appeared featuring the most popular artists in arrangers' adaptations of popular music successes and a number of shows were subsidized by brands such as Colgate, Palmolive and Picot prefiguring the later creation of national advertising agencies during the 1940s.

The Mexican radio station XEW inaugurated on 18 September 1930 became known as 'The Voice of Latin America' and promoted the bolero in a number of programmes (most famously 'The Intimate Hour' with the iconic composer Agustín Lara which ran from 1931 to 1955). In a canny piece of subliminal marketing it was commonly referred to as 'la W' pronounced 'doble-u' rather than 'uve-doble' to phonetically suggest a link with the modern culture of the U.S.A. whose radio station signals started with a 'W'. Music was predominant in the programming of XEW until the late 1950s and in the 1930s and 1940s romantic music was extremely important. These shows played throughout the day with earlier shows performed before a live studio audience and the late shows after 11pm recorded live from dance halls and hotel ballrooms. Radio provided a constant soundtrack

to everyday life with the popular boleros providing a verbal and melodic space for the expression of intimacy, hopes and desires. The sense of intimacy was heightened by the common practice of telephone requests and the fact that these performers were playing live on the radio until well into the 1950s when the use of recordings took over.

Boleros also featured in the first talkie in Mexican cinema and were a staple feature in the highly popular Mexican melodramas. Many films were named after boleros, they featured as theme tunes and leitmotifs, they were sung within films and even, albeit often rather tangentially, provided the basis for film plots (Calderón González 1996). Popular singers featured physically as well as verbally in films including Pedro Vargas, Toña la Negra and Elvira Ríos, and the aura of artists such as Lara could be used to ensure box-office success. Films provided a suitable marketing arena for hits, for example Gonzalo Curiel's smash 'Vereda tropical' from *Hombres del mar* (1936) in which the actress Esther Fernández was dubbed over with the voice of Lupita Palomera.

Through a process of transculturation the Cuban bolero genre was appropriated by composers such as Lara to symbolize a popular, urban, musical nationalism representative of a modern Mexico that was to find one of its maximum expressions in the hybrid *bolero ranchero* genre (with mariachi accompaniment). The new cultural industries and electronic mass media thus adapted existing traditions to create an urban mass culture and consolidate post-revolutionary Mexican identity (Monsiváis 1994 & 2000). However, the popularity of these products was by no means confined to Mexico. In the 1940s, with the aid of U.S. backers such as RKO, Mexico took over from Argentina as the most important Spanish language producer of film (Vega Alfaro 1995: 86).

The bolero, in the voice of singers such as the Puerto Rican Daniel Santos, has been identified with a particular Latin American experience of modernity and uneven development in liminal spaces in which the rural and the modern coexist. The focus on intimacy, emotion, interpersonal relationships, family links, the bonds of friendship and neighbourhood solidarity provide a counterpoint to modern social structures and macrosocial processes. In the dynamic act of listening, the pleasures of recognition and resignifying provide a way of negotiating change in everyday life. The repetition of

figurative tropes and musical structures provoke a sense of familiarity for communities of listeners who link the past and present in instances of cultural resistance and affirmation. This is the case of boleros such as 'En mi viejo San Juan' by Noel Estrada and 'Lamento borincano' by Rafael Hernández that clearly express nostalgia for Puerto Rico providing a bridge to mediate temporal and spatial dislocation for migrant communities in the U.S.A. (especially New York) through the pleasures of cultural mnemonics (Aparicio 1998: 92). The role of Puerto Rican composers and musicians in the U.S.A. in the development of the bolero deserves more careful consideration as does the presence of U.S. marines and their music (particularly 'race records') in the Caribbean.

An interesting multidirectional flow of influences can be traced with the U.S.A. New technologies speeded up the evolution of the genre with the sonic requirements of the radio and cinema favouring a more orchestral approach to the arrangements of boleros, as strings alone did not carry well on early audio equipment. Prominent arrangers looked to the New York big-band and jazz orchestra style (particularly from the mid-1930s). In a further transnational cross-fertilization, Cole Porter travelled to Cuba in 1933. Influenced by the bolero and other Caribbean genres he created the beguine rhythm which in turn was taken up by Mexican composers such as Alberto Domínguez Borrás to great international success with boleros such as 'Perfidia' and 'Frenesí' (1939) which were subsequently recorded by popular U.S. artists such as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Jimmy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. The bolero also crossed over into Hollywood cinema featuring in films such as *Tropical Holiday* (1938) directed by Theodore Reed for Paramount and Disney's *Los tres caballeros* (1944). In the 1940s and 1950s New York was to become an even more important nexus for the development of the bolero with the popularization of the return to the string-based Yucatecan tradition through the trio format as exemplified by the hugely successful Los Panchos formed in 1944. The influence of jazz harmonies and phrasing can also be traced in the development of the 'filin' style of bolero in Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s.

The bolero clearly embodies the paradoxical tendency towards homogeneity and heterogeneity, in other words it simultaneously exemplifies the contradictory double pull towards globalization and the

local. It is a highly hybrid genre in which the local, national and transnational interact. Through the possibilities afforded by the new mass media, in particular Mexican radio and cinema, it spread throughout Latin America and indeed beyond to the U.S.A. and Europe, adapting in response to the needs and demands of each locale. Transnationality does not necessarily indicate deterritorialisation or homogeneity. I cannot stress strongly enough that local forms emerge in each country the bolero passes through and the development of a completely different genre, the bachata, in the Dominican Republic from bolero roots is a key example of this.

As we move into the twenty-first century, the bolero remains in flux. It has continued to develop and fuse with other forms giving rise to bolero-rock and bolero-salsa. The current trend for nostalgic cultural products, which may be a reaction to a period of accelerated change not unlike that experienced in the early twentieth century when the bolero was so popular, has provided the platform the international success of older Cuban musicians and also younger artists such as the Mexican Luis Miguel or the Colombian group Los Tri-O who have both enjoyed Billboard success. In its continued combination of tradition and modernity (these artists do after all take full advantage of modern recording and production techniques, as well as slick and aggressive marketing), the bolero invokes an active nostalgia that goes beyond the longing for (better) past times to a necessity for collective memory of a past which reaches forward into the present (Vega, 1991: 217-18).

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