

Was part of the media arts history swept under the carpet? (Latin America's lost ark)

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Abstract

Who tells history? We can find multiple versions of electronic art history, most of them with subtle differences, but it has been unusual -until recently- to find references pointing to countries out of a small group from Europe and North America. Several projects have been developed to change that situation. The Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection, hosted by The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, represents an example of the relevant role that the archiving of electronic artworks and public access to them could have in forming another perspective about (electronic arts) history.

Keywords

Latin America, Archiving, Electronic Art Preservation, Electroacoustic Music History, Cultural Decentralization

Introduction

The journey from cultural memory and ethical concerns to practical strategies on preservation and the impact of disseminating knowledge generated by electronic art has been navigating a sinuous road.

Memory's death could benefit some as much as the desire for immortality could block the way to innovation open naturally to new generations. Electronic art's memory has been partially dead, or perhaps deaf or blind or simply looking to the other side, maybe to avoid the perception that the so-called digital revolution has reached most of the known world and that history does not happen only in a few "central" countries. The desire of immortality and for being a cultural lighthouse as much as the guardian of the right values and the significant art should not take us all to mislead that intelligence and sensibility belongs to a few.

Who tells history? Who knows about it or who has the opportunity to do it? We can find multiple versions of electronic art history, most of them with subtle differences, but it has been unusual -until recently- to find references pointing to countries out of a small group from Europe and North America. Inequalities

have always existed and if we want to see a change, probably we will need to work hard ourselves to produce new results. There are many lost and hidden stories about electronic art that probably should be part of the official history and not just left aside. There have been people, ideas and concepts, artworks, discoveries and inventions, and we expect someone to take care of preserving the memory of all that for us but sometimes it simply doesn't happen that way and when we look around after a while, it seems that the history has not been the one we thought it was and we remember, but a different one that is being told by others.

Between the obsession of archiving everything and the difficulty and strong responsibility of deciding what to preserve, the opportunity to archive electronic art makes us face a challenge involving technical issues and political, social, cultural and economical aspects.

How many histories can be told about the same subject? To who is their narrative directed? Today, the digital divide could be not linked to who has access to the web but to who dominates the inclusion of content or develops strategies to keep our attention on certain places and not others. It looks like we are bombarded with cues guiding us to consider that the art conceived by some cultures are the only ones to be recognized as valid.

The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology in Montreal has been a leading organization heavily focused on studying theoretical aspects related to preserving electronic art and actually archiving it. A number of major projects have been developed or hosted there since the late 90s, including the Steina and Woody Vasulka Fonds, the 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering Fonds, the Collection of Documents Published by E.A.T. and the Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection, among many others.

Music & Technology Innovation in Latin America

Political and economic instability in most Latin American countries has been deeply affecting the life of its inhabitants for decades. Support for artistic activities has usually been postponed to solve urgent social problems. In spite of that, the development of electronic arts in general and electroacoustic music in particular in the region is really astounding. To name but a few examples: Mauricio Kagel composed eight electroacoustic studies in Argentina between 1950 and 1953, according to the Hugh Davies' International Electronic Music Catalog published in 1968. Kagel was one of the pioneer composers laying the foundations of a rich history of experimentation and creation in the region. Reginaldo Carvalho and Jorge Antunes in Brazil, Juan Amenabar in Chile, Joaquín Orellana in Guatemala and Horacio Vaggione in Argentina are only some of the many names in the ocean of electroacoustic music creativity that has always been Latin America.

José Vicente Asuar composed between 1958 and 1959 in Chile his piece *Variaciones Espectrales* using only electronic sound sources. The Estudio de Fonología Musical was created in the University of Buenos Aires of Argentina by Francisco Kröpfl and Fausto Maranca at the end of 1958. During those same years, and also in Argentina, César Franchisena was experimenting with electronic sound sources at the National University of Córdoba radio station. A landmark in the electronic music history of Latin America was the lab created in Buenos Aires during 1963 at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales - CLAEM of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (the Electronic Music Laboratory was part of the Latin American Higher Studies Musical Center of the Torcuato Di Tella Institute). Peruvian composer César Bolaños created *Intensidad y Altura*, the first piece for tape produced at that lab, in 1964. In Cuba, Juan Blanco composed *Música para Danza* for tape in 1961 and *Texturas* for orchestra and tape between 1963 and 1964. Blanco composed about a hundred works using electroacoustic media, including music for mass public events and large venues. Carlos Jiménez Mabarak composed in Mexico *El Paraíso de los Ahogados*, a piece on tape, in 1960. The same year engineer Raúl Pavón built the prototype of a small electronic musical instrument featuring an oscillator with multiple waveform outputs, a white noise generator, a variety of filters, an envelope generator and a keyboard. Named *Omnifón* by Pavón, his creation was among the first voltage-controlled

electronic sound synthesizers. Well before that, in the early 40s, the aforementioned composer Juan Blanco designed an innovative electronic instrument similar in concept to the Mellotron. His Multiorgan was based on 12 loops using magnetophonic wires. It predated the Mellotron -considered the predecessor of the digital sampler, the instrument that changed the way of doing music - by several years. Fernando von Reichenbach invented in Argentina the Analog Graphic Converter in the 60s. It was used to transform graphic scores -from pencil drawings done on a paper roll into electronic control signals adapted to work with analog sound equipment. José Vicente Asuar produced in Chile a hybrid analog-digital computer system in the mid 70s, exclusively devoted to create music.

Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection

Unavailability of musical recordings, bibliography and almost any basic reference to the electroacoustic music activities that were developed since the early 1950s in several Latin American countries was commonplace when I started to work in the field around the mid-1970s. That situation did not change much during several decades. In various Latin American countries, universities and state organizations or major private foundations have taken initiatives to support art research and the use of electronic media since the early 60s, but most have stopped before developing enough resources to document their processes and preserve the results. As a consequence, many early tape compositions have been lost or the master recordings damaged.



Figure 1. The Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection. Ricardo Dal Farra © La Fondation Daniel Langlois.

The Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection with over 1,700 digital recordings of compositions by almost 400 composers, accompanied by photographs, interviews, scores, a trilingual historical essay and over 200,000 words in its database, represents an example of the relevant role that the archive of artworks and its public access can play in having another perspective about (electronic arts) history. Today this resource is being consulted extensively by people from around the world (e.g. researchers, composers, performers, musicologists, historians, artists and the general public) helping to transform the traditional perception of “ownership” that has existed in some countries with respect to electronic art history. While all recordings are available online for listening to researchers who ask for an access code to The Langlois Foundation, 558 works are freely available to the general public. The digital recording of a composition can be found by its title, the name of the composer, the country linked to that composer, the year or decade when the work was composed, etc. In addition, there are two playlists to access and listen to the compositions: one sorted alphabetically by the last name of the composer, the other sorted chronologically, following the year in which the piece was composed. Part of the 200,000+ words available in the database comes from two previous research reports

I wrote commissioned by UNESCO between 2002 and 2003: *Historical Aspects of Electroacoustic Music in Latin America: From Pioneering to Present Days* and *La música electroacústica en América Latina*. They are available online through the UNESCO’s Digi-Arts knowledge portal. These texts include references to hundreds of composers who were born or pursued a portion of their professional careers in Latin America.

Final Words

The Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection has recovered and made accessible the creative work of many electronic artists otherwise almost forgotten. It has defied the hegemonic narrative of electronic art history, breaking some memory’s death roads and slowly shifting and widening the way the history of electroacoustic music has been understood.

Archiving and disseminating electronic art history findings is crucial to comprehend the present and to build a better future.

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Panels

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Author Biography

Dr. Ricardo Dal Farra is a composer, new media artist, curator, educator and historian whose work has been focusing on new music and the electronic arts for several decades. He is professor at Concordia University, Canada and director of the CEIArte-UNTREF Electronic Arts Research Centre, Argentina. His music and media artworks have been presented in about 40 countries. Dal Farra is the founder-director of the Balance-Unbalance (electronic arts & the environmental crisis) and Understanding Visual Music conference series, and has been researcher for UNESCO in France, De Montfort University in the UK, Amauta in Peru and the National Ministry of Education in Argentina. He was director of Hexagram, the interuniversity international network for research-creation in media arts, design, technology and digital culture, and coordinator of DOCAM, the Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage research alliance. Dr. Dal Farra created the Latin American Electroacoustic Music Collection hosted by The Daniel Langlois Foundation.