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Mónica Maristain*

Music Is an Educational Art, Isn't It?

“**E**ducation in music is most sovereign because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the innermost soul and form it in virtue,” Plato said at a time when moral values were a way of establishing yourself in the world beyond the animal species we represent.

Throughout our lives, that so ungraspable and at the same time perhaps so transformable art, has accompanied our evolution, and, in a sense, putting up with every obstacle in our existence. We have to say it: the saying that music calms cats, babies, and wild beasts is more than just a saying. “Music’s theoretical methods go back to the most ancient times. In a cultured civilization, it is one of the main factors that consciously help transform traditional habits into a structured art,” says one of the many books in existence about musical theory. Even if it is a

theory, there’s a lot of space where music determines what U.S. writer Paul Auster calls “the music of chance.” Is music a moral virtue or an animal instinct that defines us as a species?

Music is the most important thing in my life. More than books. More than words. Because music allows me to not feel so outside of the world and encourages me to move to books, to words. When I want to reflect that essential feeling, I go back to the phrase coined during the Argentinean dictatorship by musician Miguel Cantilo: “If it weren’t for music, not even Tarzan could have saved me.”

Music in Books

The Music of Chance is a novel by Paul Auster, I was saying, and so is putting the mind on “random selection.” Subjecting yourself to the referee of sounds coming from different universes that combine into one in your ears and

*Mónica is a writer and cultural journalist; you can contact her at maristain@gmail.com.

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in your heart. It's a challenge that I like to take up often. But, if instead of the music of chance, it were the music of the end of the world?

That's how poet and writer León Plascencia understood it. Born in Mexico in 1968, he wrote *La música del fin del mundo* (The Music of the End of the World) precisely in 2020.¹ This book, written like a diary, where the characters talk about the southeastern winds as though they were a surprise in a city full of surprises and melancholy — something similar happens in Mexico: when it rains unexpectedly, you're in the middle of the street without an umbrella, without a raincoat, at the mercy of the drops... —, and are raised up as a beautiful, gloomy object.

"Buenos Aires seems to me like an 'other,' far off, immersed in a deception. Or maybe it's me projecting what's happening to me. I walk for hours, from one side of the street to the other, with the sweat pouring off me. The marquees announce the plays that I won't see, the premieres that will go by my life," says the artist while he evokes his craft, like an activist of tasks, and who spits out little snippets of knowledge that we sometimes enjoy. It's a book where insomnia, that hell that the main character Fuzzaro lives in and that we can do nothing about, wanders like a god without believers. "What's that man named Thelonious Monk got that when he plays, it seems that everything has the shine of a farewell?" asks Fuzzaro, who by that time is a ghost in a ghost city. This is a novel about music, and I want to tell Plascencia that I have a book written based on "Straight, No Chaser," whose cover I still remember, with a reclining Thelonious and the compass and the insides of the piano.

Music is passion; it's madness, it's everything you can't predict. "What does it matter if rock is dead? It's already done everything; it's changed the world. What more can you ask of it?" says, almost screaming, an old man who's listening to Ramones as though he were a spell of eternal life.

Notes and Lyrics/Letters

Journalist Xavier Quirarte laments the death of the "great young man" Eduardo Llerenas, the owner of Corasón records, who left an immense legacy and a phrase that is now incomparable: "There's a special emotion in the possibility of presenting new music to the public. This has been a very strong stimulus."

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, poet Hernán Bravo Varela recites with a strange musicality the verses of David Huerta, recently deceased, who wrote, among other things, *La música de lo que pasa* (The Music of What Happens).

Listen. Forget. Two fogs.

The foam of suffering
seeps through the shipwrecked lace
of my morning whistle.

Here are the sounds.

David Huerta says "Here are the sounds," as though the perception of what he experiences were only going into his ear and from there, we turned into the great listeners of the present.

Listening, for example, to *Rayuela* (Hopscotch) is an exercise that, when we were young, would take us days trying to see where Julio Cortázar had used jazz as a motivation, a lure, and —why not?— a destination.

Or to see what non-literary mode expanded in the novels of José Agustín, where rock was the matter "that had a central place in practically all his novels and stories *El rock de la cárcel*, *La contracultural en México* (Jailhouse Rock, Counterculture in Mexico)" says Sergio Téllez Pons in an article in *Tierra Adentro* magazine.

A jazz fan since his parents gave him an Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers record —his parents had a club in Tokyo—, Japanese writer Haruki Murakami (Kyoto, 1949) loves both music and literature.

In a widely-circulated *New York Times* interview a few years ago, he said that in both music and fiction, the most elemental aspect is rhythm, and that a writer's style must have good, natural, continual rhythm or people won't continue reading it. He said he understood the importance of rhythm thanks to music, mainly jazz. Then comes the melody, which in literature means the appropriate placement of words to continue the rhythm. If the words fit with the rhythm fluidly and beautifully, he says nothing more can

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be asked of them. Then comes harmony, the internal mental sounds supporting the words. And then the part he likes the best: free improvisation. On what Haruki calls a special channel, the story freely emerges from inside. The only thing he says he has to do is to go with the flow.

Although we would never say with all the lyrics that the characters' strategies and hobbies correspond to those of the author, it's easy to guess that Haruki loves jazz and Beatles' songs.

We are living in the times of the playlist. (I have a wonderful one on Spotify titled "Canciones del 2022" [Songs of 2022].) We used to listen to a record to create a playlist; now, you pick up the tunes from movies, TV series, buses, in taxis... How is it that I don't like reggaetón, but that Bad Bunny song blew me away? Or the score from the movie *Ennio, the Master*, by Giuseppe Tornatore? Or that music from Iran that I never hear on the radio?

Or the questions that Eduardo Huchín Sosa asks in his book *Calla y escucha* (Shut Up and Listen), recently published by Turner: What were Bach's innovations and why does his music continue to dazzle and move us? What was the Beatles' musical contribution to contemporary music and why are they an incomparable group? What do musicians who aren't part of the elite do to survive? Was Gabilondo Soler, Cri-Cri, a poet, a mad genius, or misunderstood? Does humor exist in music beyond acting and lyrics? What did videoclips, the symbiosis with the image, mean for music?

For this author, Mexican listeners are interested and at the same time feel that they don't know enough about music. "The idea of this book is precisely that there is no one way to listen to records. It's valid to also listen through songs. They're all valid and rich in and of themselves," says Huchín Sosa. In his book, he talks about the Beatles, who are today classic and unmovable. "Since it's so successful and innovative, the group creates a way to talk about many other types of music. I recently read a book that analyzed all the Beatles' innovations, and the author said that, to understand their innovations, you had to have minimally studied two years of musical theory. That's funny because they didn't know anything about

music. They were young, working-class kids who created those innovations. That phenomenon continues to fascinate me," writes Sosa, the managing editor of *Letras Libres* (Free Letters) literary magazine.

Who do our writers love?

ANA CLAVEL, SEEKING DARÍO GALICIA

In her recent book, *Desobedecer a los padres* (Disobeying Your Parents) (Alfaguara), Ana Clavel turns a little into Chilean Roberto Bolaño, the writer who, in *Los detectives salvajes* (The Savage Detectives), was searching for the poet Cesárea Tinajero.

Here, Ana, also at the same time somewhat exploring her own biography, searches for and finds the poet Darío Galicia, a "very strange" person, who, it is said, was left an idiot when his parents had a lobotomy performed on him to cure him of his homosexuality. In any case, she investigates and doesn't know if that's accurate or if he was operated on for an aneurism or if he was given electric shock treatment during a psychiatric hospital stay.

Ana Laurel, her character in the novel, has a soundtrack to which she has written the novel and she shares it with the readers. It starts with Lou Reed (his unforgettable song *Perfect Day*), and includes everyone from Charly García, Bob Dylan, The Velvet Underground vocalist Nico, to, of course, David Bowie.

"I got excited making the playlist. Some of the songs are in the novel and others, like *Gymnopedias*, by Satie, or Bowie's *Hunky Dory*, I listened to while I was writing," says Ana Clavel.

IN SEARCH OF AN ESCAFANDRA AND A MUSIC

In César Gándara's recently published novel *Escafandra*, the characters drive around in a gold-colored VW bug, named *Escafandra*, listening to heavy rock, accompanied by the adrenaline and dangers of a young generation trying to move ahead in search of a better life.

“Music is very important, and the soundtrack of the novel has a lot to do with death metal and trash. There was something of heavy metal. The idea was to transmit what music was for a minority group in Mexican society. There’s everything from Slayer to Black Sabbath, Motorhead, Led Zeppelin... It’s the expression of a generation that was very repressed, in Hermosillo, where all this was looked down on. An era in which being a rocker, having long hair made you be seen as a pariah. The idea was to give a voice to those characters who almost never have one,” says César Gándara.

“I think that *Escafandra* is a reflection of all of Mexico. It’s the representation of the progress the lower-middle-class aspires to. In the 1980s and 1990s, that was the cheapest car; the parts were cheaper; it was very much in the taste of the lower middle class. Lots of people had their first bug and many of us Mexicans had a ton of adventures in them, experiences,” he says.

“This novel is like a song. I wanted to sing about several things, about friendship, about an era that’s gone now, and that melancholic tone has to do with the protagonist, Palomo,” he adds.

AN ANTI-TROVA NOVEL²

“Barry Dávila, a forty-something who dresses like a heavy metal freak in the 1980s, has a plan: get together The Invincible Armada, the heavy metal, thrash group that he could have made it with if its internal fights and a society deaf to the rawness of its music hadn’t blocked the way.” This is how the synopsis of Antonio Ortuño’s new novel starts.

Published by Planeta, *La armada invincible* (The Invincible Armada) is one of the favorite novels of writer Mariño González. His colleague Jonathan Frías says, “I belong to the generation after *The Invincible Armada*. I didn’t grow up with the stridency of trash. My heroes weren’t Metallica, Sepultura, Megadeth, Slayer; my roots weren’t in Black Sabbath or AC/DC. My generation was more depressed than rebellious. We weren’t angry, we were alienated, and, above all, we were disillusioned. We grew up with grunge and alternative rock. R.E.M. and Nirvana sang our hymns. Pearl Jam, Smashing Pumpkins, and Soundgarden were everything. That didn’t mean we didn’t listen to punk and post punk. Joy Division, The Cure, Depeche Mode, Pixies, Janes Addiction. We filled up with angst and fed it.

That’s why reading a new novel by Antonio Ortuño is so significant. It’s listening to the adventures of your older brother. It’s getting into a car with a well-oiled V-8 engine. It’s flooring the accelerator from the start. It’s turning up the volume and not stopping until the world says, *Never Say Fucking Die!*”

Keeping an eye out precisely for the generation that appears in his novel, Ortuño says that *The Invincible Armada*, written in Germany during the corona virus lockdown and corrected in its last terrible year, when the author lost his brother, the great poet Ángel Ortuño, and his wife, journalist Olivia Hidalgo, is an anti-*Trova* novel. He adds that he’s far from an admirer of the ’60s generation: “I think activism is a direct road to imbecility.”

“I don’t like talking about generations, but its true that there’s more individualism and that the great collective movements somehow became little tribes related to lifestyle, to certain kinds of music, and in general many other aesthetics,” he says.

Antonio Ortuño says that heavy-metal listeners are “a lot more fun than people think and metal movies are generally self-parodying. Metalheads are very aware of the genre’s bombast, but they laugh at it.”

“Metal is enormous. When I was living in Germany, I was fascinated to see white-haired metalheads. Then three or four generations followed. The first Black Sabbath record is from 1969. The different generations of metalheads aren’t unified by metal so much; they’re not fans of River. They have lots of differences between them,” he says.

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Notes

¹ This book tells the story of the stay of a Mexican couple in Buenos Aires: Fuzzaro, a conceptual artist, and Hye, a fashion designer. She has a relationship with another man in Korea. In the middle of the trip, Hye takes an emergency trip to Seoul, sparking in Fuzzaro a spiral of fears, obsessions, and pain, in which music underlies the words.

² *La Nueva Trova Cubana*, or the New Cuban Balladeers, according to Silvio Rodríguez, one of its leading proponents, was a musical movement that emerged after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, made up of young composers from different parts of their country, fighting for the same conceptions of politics, aesthetics, art, and life. [Translator’s Note.]



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