BEYOND ‘PROTEST SONG’: 
POPULAR MUSIC IN PINOCHET’S CHILE (1973–1990)

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Those who write songs that say nothing or only obscenities, songs that curtail human dignity and do not contribute to the cultural growth of the people or youth, those also sing political song.

Víctor Jara, March 1973

For the thirtieth anniversary of the bloody coup d’état that led to the longest and most transformative presidency in modern Chile, a group of that country’s historians published a collection that documents everyday life, from fashion to sports, during that volatile 1973. César Albornoz’s chapter in that volume provides an engaging synopsis of the sounds that echoed in Chile during the last months of socialist Salvador Allende’s government. Focusing mostly on mass mediated music, he describes how radio stations broadcasted neofolk, cumbia, Anglo rock and roll, Mexican ranchera, and Spanish, Brazilian and Chilean romantic ballads. Overwhelmingly, the chart toppers came from the latter category. Albornoz concludes that even in 1973, a politically unstable year if there ever was one, the music that held mass appeal bore little apparent relation to contemporary political events.

Paradoxically, the five years leading up to the coup constitute the golden age of Chilean political song, and to this day scholars from around the world remind us about its significant role during this tumultuous period. Yet, who was listening to socially conscious music during its golden age if, despite generous government support, it was neither widely

played on the radio nor purchased by the masses? What do we make of the myth of an early 1970s mobilized population, fueled by protest songs into political action?

Studies of Chilean popular music of the second half of the twentieth century have focused almost exclusively on *música comprometida*. The concept of *música comprometida* has no direct translation, but in English it is described as music that is political, socially conscious, and born of resistance, protest, and dissent. The overwhelming scholarly interest in Chilean protest music at the expense of a wealth of musics that Chileans have passionately enjoyed for decades has resulted in a distorted portrait of music production and consumption since 1970.

Without diminishing the importance of protest song, this article seeks to present a picture more in touch with what Chileans were listening to at the time by considering the political and apolitical musics of this period in Chile side by side. I make no attempt here at a comprehensive survey of Chilean popular music under Pinochet. Readers familiar with the Chilean music scene of the 1970s and 1980s will note the absence of significant styles, such as *música típica*, ranchera, *música tropical*, *música cebolla*, and jazz-rock. While I focus on the usual suspects, namely Nueva Canción Chilena, rock, and pop, I also depart from the traditional narrative of music under dictatorship by including apolitical musics that did not express dissidence. I advocate for the study of non-socially conscious, non-overtly political popular music as a means towards destabilizing canonical histories of music under authoritarian regimes. As a corollary, I also suggest the need for the study of styles with explicit political agendas, like Nueva Canción, beyond their political impact.

**Nueva Canción Chilena**

Internationally, the most famous Chilean popular music style is ‘Nueva Canción Chilena’, a protest song movement strongly associated with the socialist project of president Salvador Allende (1970-1973). In the late 1960s, Nueva Canción artists, which included musicians such as Isabel and Ángel Parra, Víctor Jara, Patricio Manns, Osvaldo ‘Gitano’ Rodríguez, and bands like Quilapayún, Inti-Illimani, Aparcoa, and Cuncumén, developed an urban style that blended socially committed lyrics with music inspired by Chilean and Latin American folk traditions.

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4. To date the most complete overview of Chilean music of this period remains *Música Popular Chilena: 20 años, 1970-1990*, edited by Álvaro Godoy and Juan Pablo González, Santiago de Chile, Departamento de Programas Culturales del Ministerio de Educación, 1995 (Serie 20 años).

The most important source for Nueva Canción is the recollection and diffusion of folklore undertaken independently by Violeta Parra (1917-1967) and Margot Loyola (1918) in the 1950s and 1960s. Nueva Canción owes Violeta Parra two of its defining features. First, as a performer and composer, Parra developed a pan-Latin American folk aesthetic. In her music she incorporated and hybridized traditional Chilean styles she collected in her travels at home as well as Andean and Afro-American styles she first heard in Paris in the late 1950s. Second, a sizeable portion of Parra’s oeuvre was openly critical of the social inequality and the political regime of her time. Interestingly, it was also in Paris in the early 1960s that Parra transitioned from compiler and performer of Chilean folklore to composer of denunciatory songs that addressed contemporary events. As historian Claudio Rolle summarizes, Nueva Canción inherited from Parra the project of “reinterpretation of Chilean traditional music, turning rural into urban, a bucolic chant into one of denunciation and protest.”

Folklorist Margot Loyola’s imprint on Nueva Canción is strongest in terms of performing style. Countering the traditional genealogy, ethnomusicologist Agustín Ruiz Zamora argues that the singing and playing styles of Nueva Canción musicians owes more to Loyola’s polished, classically-trained technique than to Violeta Parra’s peasant-inspired style. Ruiz Zamora convincingly shows that scholars have placed undue emphasis on composition over performance, thus overestimating Parra’s influence over Loyola’s, who did not compose.

It is noteworthy that Nueva Canción’s creative sources are female artists, yet male musicians dominated the movement. The imposing visual style of bearded revolutionaries dressed in severe ponchos was, if not explicitly exclusionary, not particularly inviting to female performers. Isabel Parra, Violeta’s daughter, is a notable exception. Historian Florencia E. Mallon argues that “the multifaceted image of the dedicated young barbudo, who risked everything in the name of revolutionary justice and emerged untouched and empowered on the other side [was] built consciously and very effectively on the success of the Cuban Revolution, and on the ever more romanticized and rumor-filled legend surrounding Che...
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Guevara». It also drew», Mallon continues, «on elements of Chilean gender identities and sexual styles historically embedded in popular culture and politics».

Nueva Canción ensembles tried to bridge the gap between folk, classical and pop music traditions. Musicologist Juan Pablo González describes Nueva Canción’s music as an integration of «the richness of Argentine guitar playing, the pure and crystalline sound of Andean music, the polyphony of the American Baroque, and Afroamerican rhythm».

What González elsewhere calls «artistic treatment of folklore» is described by Gina Cánepa as an enrichment of the music «in the direction of the techniques of classical music with chamber music-like treatment of folkloric instruments». Quilapayún’s director Eduardo Carrasco summarizes this goal as an attempt «to bring popular ways of expression near to more cultivated forms without abandoning the massive character of the diffusion. This trend […] is equivalent to the creation of a non-elitist cultivated music».

Between 1970 and 1973, government-supported record labels released numerous Nueva Canción albums, and Nueva Canción concerts were well attended by passionate fans. However, Nueva Canción was largely absent from radio broadcasts and fared poorly in terms of record sales. The vast majority of Chileans, including Allende supporters, preferred to dance to cumbia and emote to baladistas such as Camilo Sesto, Roberto Carlos, Mari Trini, and Buddy Richard.

The fate of Nueva Canción changed abruptly with the coup of September 11, 1973. In a bloody takeover, the armed forces overthrew democratically elected president Salvador Allende and instated a military junta. The Commander in Chief of the Army, General Augusto Pinochet was appointed head of the junta, and in late 1974 declared President of Chile. Pinochet’s rule of Chile lasted for sixteen and one-half years, and was notoriously involved in brutal human rights violations, including killings, disappearances, imprisonment, torture, and exile of political opponents. In the direct aftermath of

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13. Id. ‘Inti-Ilimani’ and the Artistic Treatment of Folklore’, op. cit. (see note 6).


the coup, any person who had been involved in Allende’s government was considered a political opponent and was at risk. Because Nueva Canción had played such a highly visible role in Salvador Allende’s campaign and presidency, its members became an immediate target of the regime’s repression. As Nancy Morris recounts, Nueva Canción «was banned from the airwaves, removed from record stores, confiscated, and burned along with books and other ‘subversive’ material during the house-to-house searches that immediately followed the coup».

The repressive measures taken towards Nueva Canción musicians were preemptive, beginning in the immediate aftermath of the coup, before they could even voice dissent. The emblematic figure of the military junta’s early repression is singer-songwriter and theater director Víctor Jara (1932-1973). A key member of the Nueva Canción movement, Jara had played an active role in Allende’s presidential campaign and years as president. For this he was detained, tortured and killed within days of the coup, becoming a widely recognized political martyr. In his songs, Jara takes Chilean folk melodic and guitar strumming patterns as a point of departure, yet rarely sticks to tradition. His lyrics are often metaphoric and celebratory of rural life, as in Plegaria a un Labrador (winner of the first Nueva Canción Festival in 1969) and El Arado. Jara remains an inspiring international symbol of political and social commitment in music.

At the time of the coup, the two most important Nueva Canción ensembles, Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún were abroad, travelling as Allende’s cultural ambassadors. With support from European socialist parties Inti-Illimani set residence in Italy and Quilapayún in France. They remained in exile until 1988 when the regime cancelled exile decrees against Chileans abroad. European audiences embraced Nueva Canción ensembles passionately and surprisingly fast. Ethnomusicologist Fernando Ríos provides two sources for this phenomenon. First, «long-standing French interest in Andean music and its growing association with leftism greatly facilitated Chilean Nueva Canción musicians’ quick rise to prominence in Europe». Second, there was an ongoing movement of widespread solidarity with victims of United States-backed right-wing military dictatorships, particularly in France.

Inti-Illimani and Quilapayún continued to develop their careers in exile, touring and recording regularly. Inti-Illimani’s musical director Horacio Salinas explains that «showing [their] work to people who were, up to a certain point, strangers to that music […] required a conscious effort to universalize [the group’s] work». As a result, in exile their

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Music became less political and more elaborate, embracing larger forms and more complex songwriting and arranging. For Inti-Illimani this process culminated with two albums recorded with renowned guitarists John Williams (classical) and Paco Peña (flamenco), *Fragments of a Dream* (1987) and *Leyenda* (1990). Quilapayún followed a similar path. In the early 1980s the band disengaged itself from the Chilean communist party as part of a process of artistic and aesthetic exploration. Through collaborations with painter Roberto Matta and classical composers Gustavo Becerra and Juan Orrego Salas, Quilapayún adopted surreal texts and avant-garde techniques such as polytonality. This process began with the 1979 album *Umbral* and reached its peak with 1982’s *La Revolution et les Etoiles*.

CANTO NUEVO

Despite the exile of its most important artists, Nueva Canción resurfaced in Chile in 1975 due to the efforts of musicians that had been active before the coup and remained in Chile, as well as the contributions of a few new artists. To avoid censorship, these artists substituted the overtly political lyrics of Allende-era songs with metaphorical and coded language. They also replaced the influence of Andean music, so prevalent in Nueva Canción, with the more international sounds of jazz and fusion. In 1976, DJ Ricardo García named this new style ‘Canto Nuevo’. This rechristening was a clever rhetorical move because it suggested a tie with Nueva Canción while removing the loaded, and then dangerous, baggage of the original term. While Nueva Canción musicians in exile achieved an international reputation, Canto Nuevo artists remained largely underground in Chile, performing mostly for small audiences of the opposition in cafes and university-sponsored recitals.

Scholarly studies present Canto Nuevo as a music of resistance and solidarity, a style that kept the memory of the Allende years alive under the dictatorship. While this is valid for a number of artists, such as Tito Fernández, Hugo Moraga, and Schwenke & Nilo, there was an important group of Canto Nuevo artists who preferred to sing about love and existential issues rather than political contingencies. The absence of discussion

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of these artists in studies of Canto Nuevo is problematic not only because it results in an unrepresentative picture of the movement, but, most importantly, because these artists were the most listened to at the time by Chileans of all political affiliations.

When massively popular singer-songwriters, such as Eduardo Gatti and Fernando Ubiergo, are mentioned in Canto Nuevo studies they are regularly dismissed as too individualistic and commercial. Patricia Díaz-Inostroza, for example, writes that Fernando Ubiergo’s aims differ from Canto Nuevo’s in that «his creativity is at the service of commercial success […] rather than being in tune with the community as a depositary of cultural references»26. Fernando Ubiergo (b. 1955) managed to make the best of what was available to Chilean musicians in the late 1970s. Instead of waiting for a record deal from a severely weakened record industry, he tried his luck in one of the few spaces left for new artists: song festivals. In 1977 Ubiergo won the Festival de la Primavera with Un café para Platón, and the following year the Festival de Viña del Mar with El Tiempo en las Bastillas, which led to the recording of his first album.

Ubiergo secured a place for himself in the media by offering a local version of the product most pervasive at the time, that is, European balada (pop ballad). In his hit songs Ubiergo combined the intimate self-reflexivity of singer-songwriters with features of the international balada, such as the use of direct, everyday language; catchy choruses; a higher singing range and longer-held notes; and unprepared modulations to heighten the emotionality of the song. While the song structures suggest that they were composed with a guitar in mind as accompaniment, for their performance in song competitions and eventually recordings, they received rich orchestral arrangements. The elegant orchestrations, by Guillermo Rifo, bare the influence of contemporary European pop ballad, particularly the work Waldo de los Ríos did for the Spanish label Hispavox.

With his apolitical stance and boyish, clean-shaven face, Ubiergo appeared non-threatening to the regime. Indeed, he may have seemed an attractive symbol of a new aesthetic27. Pinochet sent Ubiergo repeated invitations for a personal meeting. Each time the singer declined. There were consequences, of course; despite his apolitical stance, Ubiergo was not immune to censorship. His recording contract was revoked for including a song by Víctor Jara and two by Cuban ‘Nueva Trova’ musician Silvio Rodríguez in his 1979 album Ubiergo. Meanwhile, despite securing a place on TV shows — a sanctioned space reserved for baladistas —, Ubiergo remained popular among the opposition, performing regularly at university events that had a clear anti-regime character28.

Canto Nuevo’s popularity decreased considerably in the 1980s. Mark Mattern suggests that the dilemma of political Canto Nuevo «lay in the tension it faced between its crucial role of political remembrance and maintenance of democratic identity and, on the other hand, its tendency to become confined, in terms of mass appeal, to politically impotent nostalgia. Ironically, the role of canto nuevo in keeping memories alive also partly defined its failure. By looking backward it defined itself at least initially in nostalgic terms that failed to connect with the contemporary concerns of many youth»29. The 1980s generation showed little interest in nostalgia for a period they had no direct memory of. Instead, it embraced the brand new sounds of an emerging rock and pop scene.

ROCK

Before the mid 1980s Chilean rock was largely detached from party politics. In the early 1970s, rock’s North American origins and Chilean rock musicians’ resistance to political affiliation resulted in little support by government-controlled record labels busy with Nueva Canción. One of Nueva Canción’s declared goals, subsequently shared by Canto Nuevo, was to provide an alternative to North American music in order to fight cultural imperialism. Thus, most Nueva Canción artists did not incorporate North American styles such as rock and jazz in their otherwise pan-American creations.

Despite these differences, early 1970s rock and Nueva Canción had more in common than is generally assumed. Both Ángel Parra and Víctor Jara developed musical collaborations with rock band Los Blops, and several more collaborations were planned for 1973 but never materialized because of the coup30. Moreover, at roughly the same time, several Chilean rock bands were ‘discovering’ Andean music and other Latin American folk traditions and incorporating them into their music. Inspired by a hippie worldview rather than a political project, bands like Los Jaivas and Los Blops dreamed of an Americas unified through its musical traditions.

Los Jaivas, arguably the most important band in Chilean rock history, were the first to develop a compelling hybrid of rock with Latin American folk music. Before they became interested in Latin American fusion Los Jaivas were a progressive rock band given to experimentation and extensive collective improvisations. Starting in the early 1970s, Los Jaivas began a process pianist Claudio Parra describes as «mestizaje»31. Rather than attempting an authentic reproduction of Latin American folklore, Los Jaivas incorporated folk

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elements, such as pentatonic scales, parallel fourths and fifths, traditional dance rhythms and a plethora of folk instruments to their rock core.

In Gina Cánepa’s words, Los Jaivas «mix the new with the traditional, the creole guitar with the electric guitar; quartz lights with quenas from the Andean highlands, amplifiers with the truntraca of the mapuche region of the south of Chile; synthesizer with the charango from the Quechua-Aymara region, echo chamber with the cultrún, a type of shamanic drum from Mapuche ritual»32. Like Beatle George Harrison’s early sitar playing, Los Jaivas adopted instruments by trying them out instead of pursuing academic study. Claudio Parra explains that Los Jaivas were not interested in ‘reassessing Chilean music, in being Chilean. [...] To play a cueca [Chile’s national dance], a [Venezuelan] joropo, or a malambo [from Argentina] was the same to us; it was all our music»33.

In 1972 Los Jaivas had their first radio hit with Todos Juntos, a song developed as a collective improvisation over a huayno pattern. The song’s utopian message («If we all live apart, what are the sea and sky for?; Why should we live so apart if the world wants to unite us») was at odds with a country highly polarized by Allende’s government34. Los Jaivas sympathized with Allende’s project but remained outside the political contingency, openly identifying instead with a global counterculture movement.

After the coup, Los Jaivas lived in Argentina and later in France. Unlike exiled Nueva Canción musicians, Los Jaivas emigrated voluntarily and returned periodically to perform in Chile. Pianist Claudio Parra remembers that the French had difficulty accepting them because they did not fit the mold of the Chilean refugee35.

Los Jaivas’s 1981 album Alturas de Machu Picchu is widely considered the best Chilean rock has produced. A musicalization of selections from Part II of Pablo Neruda’s magnum opus Canto General (1950), the album manages to convey the power and depth of the poetry through evocative soundscapes, virtuosic playing, and references to myriad Latin American folk music traditions. That year the band returned home for the first time in five years to perform and was struck to learn that fans knew the album by heart. The album’s popularity and the success of the sold-out concert tour marks the beginning of Chilean rock’s massification and opened the door to a new generation of bands that emerged in the mid 1980s.

The period 1983–1986 represents a turning point in the history of the Chilean dictatorship. The culture of fear prevalent in the 1970s begins to melt as people took to the streets to voice dissent and the regime began to lose control of public space. This process was set in motion on May 11, 1983, ‘the Day of the first great National Protest’. Initiated by the Copper Workers Federation (CTC), the momentous peaceful demonstration called

on people to protest by «keeping children from school, purchasing nothing, banging pots at home at 8:00 PM, driving slowly, refraining from errands, and turning off lights for five minutes at 9:30 PM»\textsuperscript{35}. The ensuing pot banging and car honking throughout Santiago proved that the country was connected in a way that no one thought possible. For the next year and a half, street protests occurred almost every month. As a result, Steve J. Stern suggests, «dissident memory underwent rapid and turbulent expansion, and it fed into wider struggles to defeat the dictatorship»\textsuperscript{37}.

The rock bands of this period took advantage of the more open political climate of the 1980s by singing in a more «direct, transgressive, and simple» language — a world apart from Canto Nuevo’s contrived metaphors\textsuperscript{38}. In fact, 1980s rock musicians defined themselves almost in opposition to 1970s Canto Nuevo. Dissatisfied with the polarized binaries generated by the regime, bands like Aparato Raro, Electrodomésticos, and Los Prisioneros resisted taking sides regarding Pinochet’s dictatorship. Most importantly, by setting social criticism to a danceable beat these bands achieved what Canto Nuevo could not: reach a younger audience.

Los Prisioneros not only spearheaded this movement, but its leader, Jorge González (1964) unwillingly became the voice of the new generation. In concerts and interviews he was outspoken, defiant, and cocky at a time when circumspection was the norm. The trio met in the Santiago neighborhood of San Miguel, and González made a point of reminding audiences of the band’s working-class origins, for which they were often described as resentful (resentidos). Interestingly, it was the upper-middle class audience that they spoke against that first embraced their music, not their peers in San Miguel.

Their first album \textit{La Voz de los '80} (1984) bares the influence of The Clash in its embrace of a punk aesthetic and social denunciation set to clean electric guitar and a danceable beat. Its direct and controversial lyrics criticized North American imperialism (\textit{Latinoamerica es un pueblo al sur de EE. UU.}), the media’s portrayal of masculinity (\textit{Mentalidad Televisiva}), the inertia of the 1970s (\textit{La Voz de los '80}), and the contrived metaphors of Canto Nuevo (\textit{Nunca Quedas Mal con Nadie}). The overall message was a defiant call for a new generation to speak up and act against what González perceived as 1970s apathy. In recent years, González has explained that when he wrote those songs he was, like a large portion of the youth population, unaware of the regime’s history of abuse and censorship\textsuperscript{39}. Thus, he assumed that Canto Nuevo artists’ ambiguous posturing was the result of artistic pretension, rather than fear of repression.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{38} Escárate, Tito. \textit{El Rock Chileno}, op. cit. (see note 30), p. 158.
González recognizes the band’s sophomore album, *Pateando Piedras* (1986), as their political awakening. While the album’s sound is poppier because of the use of synthesizers, samplers and sequencers, the lyrics turn more critical and incisive. Topics include the layoffs of industry workers (*Muevan las Industrias*) and the widening gap in social inequality, particularly in terms of education and employment (*El baile de los que sobran, Por qué los ricos*). González’s perceptive lyrics documented the painful fact that social inequality had worsened during the dictatorship, as demonstrated by unemployment rates ranging between 30% and 45% among working-class youth in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1982–1983.

**Pop**

The dictatorship transformed pop music to a lesser degree than it did Nueva Canción. Pop music artists were largely apolitical, thus suffered neither censorship nor other forms of repression. Nevertheless, the dismemberment of the local music industry effectively transformed pop music’s distribution mode and severely limited artists’ career opportunities.

During Pinochet’s dictatorship, the revenues of the Chilean recording industry reached an all-time low. The protectionist tax for foreign musical imports decreased from 94% before 1973 to 10% in 1979, and local LP pressing halted in 1980. While local manufacturing languished, imports and sales of blank cassette tapes increased considerably, generating profit greater than the local music industry’s total revenue. This had two transformative effects on the pop music scene.

First, the only options for local pop artists were to make a career out of TV appearances and participation in song festivals. As producer Marcelo García explains: «During that period, TV occupied radio’s role. Music manufacturing companies closed down, and labels thought twice before producing a Chilean artist». Two televised spaces became iconic of Pinochet’s regime: the TV show *Sábado Gigante* and the annual song contest ‘Festival Internacional de la Canción de Viña del Mar’. These venues favored *balada*, the slow to mid-tempo love song performed by a singer accompanied by a studio orchestra. All pop artists who found fame or remained visible during this time, such as Buddy Richard, Juan Antonio Labra, Juan Carlos Duque, Myriam Hernández, and Alberto Plaza, did so by embracing *balada* and becoming TV staples.

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43 Quoted in *ibidem*, p. 22.
A second effect of the dearth of local music recordings is that it created a wide opening for foreign artists. Particularly popular during the late 1970s and early 1980s were baladistas (romantic crooners) from Spain (Raphael, Julio Iglesias, Camilo Sesto, Miguel Bosé), Italy (Gianni Bella, Franco Simone), and Mexico (Emmanuel, Yuri). Foreign musicians avoided making political statements in press conferences and interviews, but their willingness to perform under Pinochet was enough to mark them as pro-Pinochet. Camilo Sesto gave a concert in 1973, just months after the coup — and in later recitals in other countries he was booed for having done so. Julio Iglesias was once asked how he had felt singing in the same Chilean stadium where Nueva Canción's Víctor Jara was killed. Iglesias politely replied, «I sing for the masses, not for political leaders»\(^4^5\).

While the regime did not actively endorse or promote balada, its ubiquitous presence in pro-government spaces, like TV, was enough to stigmatize it as ‘official’ music among the opposition. For them, balada was at the same time seductive and repulsive, thus it became a kind of national guilty pleasure. As I have argued elsewhere, only in the post-authoritarian period, when Chileans slowly moved beyond the polarized binaries of the dictatorship, they came to terms with their conflicted appreciation for balada\(^4^6\).

LISTENING BEYOND POLITICAL SONG

News of the Chilean coup d’état shocked the world in 1973\(^4^7\). As the wealth of exhaustive studies published in the last five years demonstrates, Pinochet and the Chilean dictatorship continue to fascinate scholars in Chile and abroad\(^4^8\). There is no doubt Nueva Canción is Chile's most famous musical export to the world. It is the only Chilean music that regularly appears on the World Music circuit and in university curricula in Europe and North America. Nueva Canción's lasting legacy is such that its sound signifies Chile abroad. As renowned popular music scholar Philip Tagg writes, «anything resembling an ensemble of kena flutes and charangos came to be associated with South America, most probably with suffering and Chile, at least in the ears of the adult Northern European audience»\(^1^\)\(^9\).

The attempt to understand the role of music under Pinochet's dictatorship based only on political music or on audiences who heard music as political has resulted in prob-

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\(^1^\)\(^9\). VERGARA, Ángela. «El Reportaje a Chile», in: 1973: La vida cotidiana de un año crucial, op. cit. (see note 3), pp. 31-57.


lematic generalizations about the music’s impact, and more broadly, about Chilean society under Pinochet. These over-generalizations are the result of an indiscriminate focus on the memories and experiences of a selective fraction of the population, namely Pinochet opponents old enough to remember the Allende years. Indeed, this methodological problem is not unique to music studies. In an otherwise laudatory review, political scientist Patricio Navia criticizes Steve J. Stern’s Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973-1988 (see note 36), a massive oral history-based study of memory in Pinochet’s Chile, for the author’s selection of interviewees. «Stern», Navia writes, «commits selection by dependent variable, for he seeks to understand the memory box by interviewing people for whom memory [of the 1973 coup and dictatorship] was very important»50. Navia’s own research on electoral participation leads him to suggest that that may not be the case for most Chileans. He argues that «the 1973 coup was a dramatic and violent way to topple a government, but despite widespread human rights violations after the coup, it is probably safe to say that a majority of Chileans were much less traumatized by the unfolding of events than were the people interviewed by Stern»51.

Victor Jara is correct in his assertion, presented here as epigraph, that all songs carry a political ideology, whether explicitly or implicitly. But his quote is too often misused to justify that all music under Pinochet was in some way addressing the dictatorship or singing about it. While it is tempting to read macro politics into song lyrics, it can easily lead to misinterpretations when it is not grounded in direct ethnography with active participants or when it fails to consider the musician’s intent. As a result, the term ‘protest music’ is often used indiscriminately.

For example, in Battling for Hearts and Minds, Stern describes Los Prisioneros as «a protest rock group» that captured the rising culture of dissent of the period 1983-198652. Stern, like Vilches and Neustadt before him, suggests that Los Prisioneros did not address the regime directly to avoid censorship53. But interviews with lead songwriter Jorge González and his collaborators suggest that he had something more ambitious in mind when he wrote the songs for the legendary debut album. In an interview with music critic Marisol García, Los Prisioneros’s long-time manager and producer Carlos Fonseca explains that «[Los Prisioneros] wanted to be successful [exitos], and successful everywhere. That’s why they didn’t address the songs to the Chilean reality. Now we realize that despite [their intentions] people turned those songs into fighting weapons against the dictatorship»54.

It was an older generation, the one represented in Stern’s memory study, who first turned Los Prisioneros into spokespeople for anti-dictatorship youth — a role González rejected. Having grown up in San Miguel, Los Prisioneros were painfully aware of the social inequalities that plagued, and still exist in Chile. But it is likely that Los Prisioneros were ‘less traumatized’ by Pinochet’s dictatorship than critics would like to suggest. At least early on, Los Prisioneros’s goal was to move beyond the contingencies of the mid 1980s, to address larger issues important to youth across the hemisphere.

The canonical narrative of Los Prisioneros solely as protest rockers ignores the fact that Jorge González grew up listening to, and loving, his mother’s favorite music, romantic balada. This influence is evident in the band’s 1989 cover version of Salvatore Adamo’s 1964 hit La Noche and in González’s own composition Estrechez de Corazón (1990), a song inspired by El Amor de mi Vida, a 1978 balada by Camilo Sesto. This narrative purposefully skips Los Prisioneros’s excellent Corazones (1990), a synth pop album of lovelorn songs, the most commercially successful of their career. The same can be argued about studies of Inti-Illimani solely as protest musicians. These overlook Inti-Illimani’s Arregárate la Piel (1996), the album where the band finally embraced bolero and ranchera, two genres profoundly-entrenched in Chilean culture that Inti-Illimani had dismissed in early years. Not surprisingly, Arregárate la Piel spoke powerfully to Chilean audiences who flocked to Inti-Illimani’s live concerts and made the album their best seller to date.

Even our understanding of early 1970s Nueva Canción will be enriched by approaching it not solely as political music. It is worth considering, for example, the fact that Nueva Canción had a more complicated relationship to rock than is commonly acknowledged. Cánepa writes that Víctor Jara «believed that Chilean New Song had to reject as agents of imperialism the use of elements from pop-rock music». If this is correct, how do we explain Jara’s 1971 choice to record two of his songs with rock group Los Blops? Perhaps Jara had been, to some extent, influenced by Bob Dylan’s then recent transformation from folk to rock. As Jara’s widow, Joan stated in 2003, «Víctor’s image had become that of a poster, a clenched fist, completely politicized. But he was not a symbol. He was a man, and it is important to recover him in all of his dimensions». As I have demonstrated above, the same might be said for Chilean popular music of this period as a whole. Without diminishing the significance of the politically engaged Chilean music that has dominated the scholarship, a broader picture will contribute to a more nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of that period.

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