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"WE FIGHT FOR WHAT IS OURS": DESTABILIZATION OF VOICE IN *CANTATA POPULAR SANTA MARÍA DE IQUIQUE*

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Abstract

How does a voice's function change when the identity of its owner is unknown? Written in a classical form for an Andean-Western ensemble, the *Cantata Santa María de Iquique* by Luis Advis recounts the 1907 massacre of nitrate miners in the Chilean port city of Iquique. Quilapayún premiered the work in 1969, situating it within the heart of the *Nueva Canción* movement and a period of civil unrest in Chile. This study examines how Advis destabilizes the roles of the miners and contemporary narrators within the cantata's choruses, lending ambiguity to the perspective of the voice through literary and musical devices. In turn, this perspectival multiplicity highlights the activist political message of the piece. Current scholarship traces resignifications of Advis' cantata from its premiere through the present; this study delves into specific aspects of the work that make this resignification possible and powerful. In today's era, where the songs of *Nueva Canción* once again give voice to the political concerns of Chilean protesters, examination of *Cantata Popular*'s construction provides insight into the sustained popularity and utility of other works from this movement.

Keywords: Chile, Nueva Canción, popular cantata

Inside the Santa María School in Chile's port town of Iquique, the Chilean army massacred approximately 2,000 to 3,600 people on December 21, 1907. Thousands of nitrate miners and their families had gathered there to protest and negotiate conditions in the mines; worker safety, compensation practices, and volatile, repressive regulations comprised three central issues. Initially, the miners had requested that governmental parties act as mediators between the worker coalition and the foreign nitrate mine bosses, but the ministry of the interior proved less than sympathetic to the workers' cause. Under appointment from President Pedro Montt and orders from Minister of the Interior Rafael Sotomayor, General Silva Renard arrived

in Iquique with permission to use any means necessary to quell the unrest. Workers refused to leave their gathering space, and Silva ordered his troops to open fire.

During the next fifty years, political upheaval swept across South America, in part as a reaction against events like this one. In Chile, discontent with quasi-feudalistic conditions reached a fever pitch. Many Chileans looked to socialism as a model for restructuring contemporary political and social systems, which led to the formation of the Unidad Popular (UP): a broad, powerful coalition of six progressive parties. Ultimately, the UP championed the candidacy of Salvador Allende, who served as Chile's president from 1970–1973. (His term, of course, ended abruptly with the United States-supported coup d'etat and the beginning of Augusto Pinochet's violent dictatorship.)

Nevertheless, the Allende administration owed some of its initial success to a counterhegemonic musical crusade: *la Nueva Canción.*[1] This movement employed instruments and musical styles from across Latin America as it advocated for the causes of the working class. One of New Song's most prominent musicians, Victor Jara, described its purpose in this way: "For our people, it is clear that la Nueva Canción chilena is committed to the history, the combat, the life of the workers and the youth."[2] A distinct product of this era exists in the *Cantata Popular Santa Maria de Iquique* composed by Luis Advis and premiered by the performing group Quilapayún. This cantata combines Western structural elements and instruments with Andean ones. In the choruses of *Cantata Popular Santa María de Iquique*, Advis destabilizes the miner and narrator roles, lending an ambiguity to the perspective of the voice. This, in turn, highlights the activist political message of the piece.

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[1] J. Patrice McSherry, *Chilean New Song: The Political Power of Music, 1960s–1973* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015), 21.

[2] Raúl Encina and Rodrigo Fuenzalida, R, *Víctor Jara: Testimonio de un artista* (Santiago: Centro de Recopilaciones y Testimonio, 1988), 22.

Since 1800, composers have applied the term "cantata" to a broad swath of vocal works, making a specific cantata structure or a cohesive history of development difficult to pin down. Accordingly, *Cantata Popular* is comprised of eighteen total parts, the work contains one *preludio instrumental* (instrumental prelude), four *interludios* (one sung interlude and three instrumental interludes), and six *canciones* (songs for solo and/or chorus). Its two *pregones* reflect the work's distinctly Latin American character: in Spain, South America, and the Caribbean, *pregones* exist as songs based on the cries of street vendors. Five *relatos* serve as the spoken narration sometimes found in the Western cantata structure. However, in this case, three *relatos* also include sound effects that interrupt the narrator's script—short musical phrases played by the guitars, charango, and bombo. (For a musical example, see Figure 1.)

Figure 1. "Sound effects" in *Relato* (IX).

Within this structure, the existence of a chorus provides an ideal platform for destabilization of voice within the perceived roles of miners and contemporary political activist-narrators. Of course, a choir as a united ensemble presents a direct parallel with these united "ensembles." A chorus also serves as an image of a coordinated effort and as a testament to human power. In modern film scores, choruses such as Carl Orff's "O Fortuna" from *Carmina Burana* epitomize vignettes of concerted group struggles.

Paralleling united ensembleship within historical context, Chilean socialists banded together under the goals of electing Salvador Allende, improving education, and championing workers' rights.[3] Miners also crusaded under their own shared causes: improve working conditions and obtain higher wages.[4] Correlating with the idea of choruses as demonstrations of power, Chilean socialists organized into political parties and defined their own vein of Nueva Canción, while thousands of nitrate miners traveled to Iquique in a concerted effort to protest and negotiate. *Santa María de Iquique*'s choruses as a convention of form, therefore, create opportunity for metaphor establishment as well as play a role in the insecure nature of narrative voice.

Text, in conjunction with the choral device, lends extra layers of semiotic meaning to the work. In his 2006 thesis "Poesía, canción y cultura popular en Latinoamérica: La Nueva Canción Chilena," Freddy Vilches examines the text in *Cantata Santa María* as an example of *testimonio*, a Latin American literary methodology. Translated to English, this term means something similar to "testimony" or "witness account," and it generally pertains to politically charged works in which an author examines a past event from the perspective of a person who experienced the event. In employing a first-person narrative, the author attempts to reflect larger truths that surface as a result of the event. However, Advis' narrative voice in the cantata cannot consistently employ this methodology due to shifts in perspective and temporality. To account for this, Vilches analyzes it within the framework of a *paratestimonio*, which relaxes the requirement that the narrator act specifically as a witness or protagonist of the event.[5]

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[3] Unidad Popular, *Programa básico de gobierno de la Unidad Popular* (Santiago, Chile: n.p., 1969), 13–15.

[4] Luis Advis, *The Siege of Santa Maria de Iquique: A People's Cantata of the Chilean Nitrate Miners*, Quilapayún, Paredon Records, 1970, vinyl record, liner notes by Hector Garcia.

[5] Freddy Vilches, "Poesía, canción y cultura popular en Latinoamérica: La Nueva Canción Chilena" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2006), 295.

This literary analysis certainly provides textual insight, but it neglects consideration of musical aspects that also contribute to voice destabilization. For example, secular Western cantatas such as J.S. Bach's "Schweigt stille, plaudert nicht" (the Coffee Cantata) tend to name characters in the score or, at the very least, designate voice parts. In the case of *Cantata Santa María*, however, the score's voice parts only designate Soloists 1 and 2, Choruses 1 and 2, and a narrator. Advis represents all voice parts in the treble clef, though the original Quilapayún recording sung in a tenor-baritone range reveals this to be a flexible notation choice rather than an intentional assignment to a soprano or alto. Of course, one must also note the original performance context: Advis wrote this work specifically for Quilapayún, a group comprised of musicians unfamiliar with Western music notation. He taught each part individually using aural techniques.[6] Even with this in mind, Advis' non-specific scoring terms allow for variety in performance and lend an element of ambiguity to voice ownership, reflecting that a variety of people may choose to perform the work in solidarity with the same political message.

Within individual chorus sections, context-specific textual and musical devices also create varying degrees of voice stability. Placed along a stability continuum, the first pregón ("Señoras y señores") and the canción final ("Ustedes ya escucharon") occupy the end of the spectrum reflecting distinct, distinguishable worker and contemporary activist roles. In the first pregón, the text of the solo section defines the soloists and the chorus as contemporary narrating bodies: "Señoras y señores/ venimos a contar/ aquello que la historia/ no quiere recordar."[7] Accordingly, when the chorus enters on verse two with "Seremos los hablantes/ diremos la verdad,"[8] the group demonstrates oneness with the established narrating body. The final

[6] Eduardo Carrasco, *Quilapayun: La revolución y las estrellas* (Santiago: RIL editores, 2003), 153–154.

[7] "Ladies and gentlemen/ we've come to tell/ that which history/ doesn't want to remember" (I. Pregón; my translation).

[8] "We will be the speakers/ we will tell the truth" (I. Pregón).

canción's *huayno* reflects a return to this perspective through the following textual cue in the chorus entrance: "La historia que han escuchado/ de nuevo sucederá."[9]

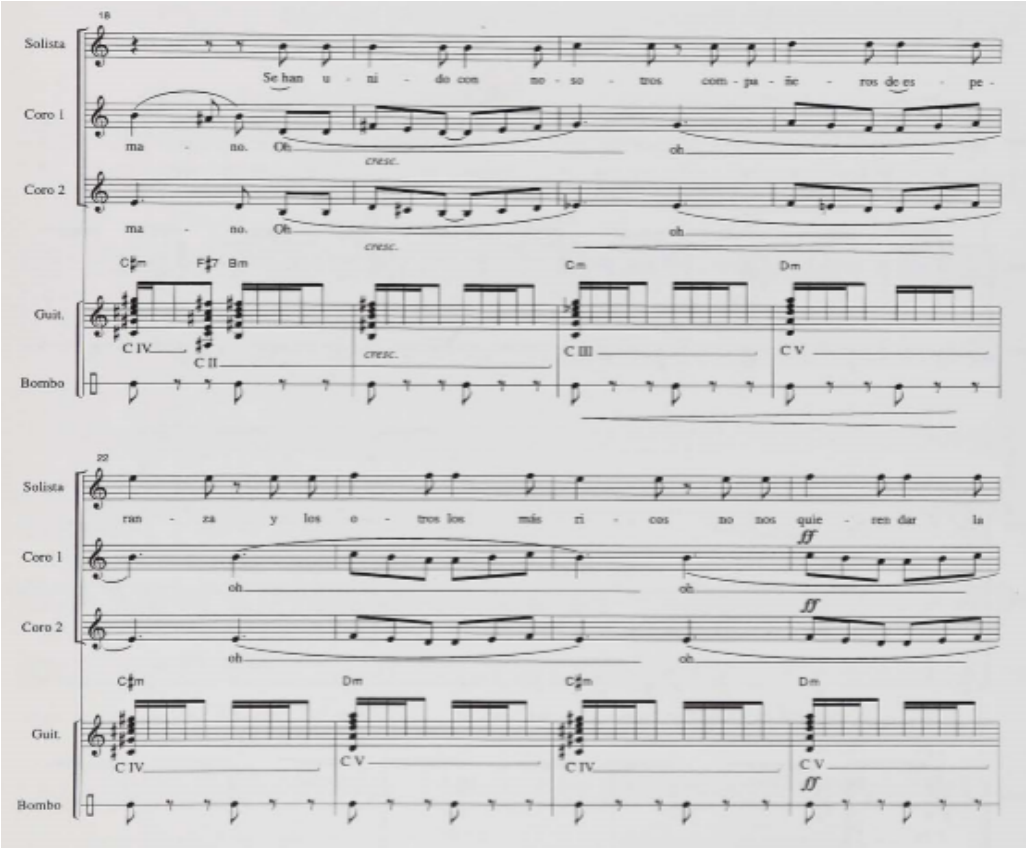
The unity between soloist and chorus becomes questionable, however, with the introduction of Canción IV: "El sol en el desierto grande." Whereas the first pregón places the soloist and chorus in the same temporal and narrative spheres, this song places them in irresolute juxtaposition. The soloist speaks of *el obrero* from a third-person perspective, while the chorus narrates a scene of suffering in the pampa from a first-person perspective: "El sol en el desierto grande/ y la sal que nos quemaba…"[10] These lyrics exist as a strong example of *(para)testimonio*. Read from the contemporary activist perspective as a poetic description, this serves as a gesture of solidarity and empathy.

The Interludio Cantado ("Se han unido con nosotros") presents specific instances of musical methods of destabilization in conjunction with textual devices. Here, the chorus seems to take on the role of the miners: "Hasta Iquique nos hemos venido/ pero Iquique nos ve como extraños./ Nos comprenden algunos amigos/ y los otros nos quitan la mano."[11] Directly after singing this text, the chorus launches into a sequence on "oh" below the soloist's declaration of unity with the miners (see Figure 2). Musically, this adds rhythmic and dynamic intensity to the message of the soloist's urgent contemporary message: "Se han unido con nosotros/ compañeros de esperanza/ y los otros los más ricos/ no nos quieren dar la cara."[12] This arrangement choice also creates a liminal space of vocality due to the coexisting temporalities of the two parts; it creates an almost-physical connection with the past. By drawing equivalence between contemporary struggles of people in Chile and those of the miners, the work warns its audience

[9] "The history that you've heard, will happen again" (XVIII. Canción Final).
[10] "The sun in the huge desert/ and the salt that burned us…" (IV. Canción).
[11] "To Iquique we have come/ but Iquique sees us as strangers./Some friends understand us,/ and others stop joining hands with us" (X. Interludio Cantado).
[12] "[The miners] have united with us/ comrades in hope/ and the others, the ones who are richer/ don't want to face us" (X. Interludio Cantado).

that ruthless slaughter of innocents could happen once again—that is, unless society takes strong political action against the rich and corrupt in power.

Figure 2. Mixing temporalities through counterpoint in the *Interludio Cantado*.



Advis reinforces the magnitude of these stakes in the sobering canción “Murieron tres mil seiscientos” by employing chant to share the grim results of the massacre. The score denotes that the song should be performed in the manner of a litany, presumably with reverence and restraint. This performance mode creates a distinct flavor of liminality due to the nature of litany as a transcendent and equalizing worship element. In a worship service, either a cantor sings the litany (which equalizes the congregation in listening) or the congregation sings in unison (which equalizes the congregation in singing). By utilizing the litany style, Advis places the somber

massacre statistics at the forefront of the performance rather than featuring any one musician. Highlighting the massacre's aftermath and avoiding any connection to musical themes from elsewhere in the cantata also contributes to vocal ambiguity by allowing the solemn reflection to stand alone without connection to perceived roles.

In contrast, *Cantata Santa Maria's* penultimate canción ("A los hombres de la pampa") ties in a number of previous musical and textual elements as it builds to a frenetic swirl of voices. The chorus adopts a didactic mantra in the *allegro* sections: "No hay que ser pobre, amigo, es peligroso."[13] In measures 22–62, this motif combines with the soloist's theme and the chorus's "oh" counterpoint from the Interludio Cantado, blending the voices of the miners, the narrator, and the activist-chorus into a cacophony of sound. This layering, in addition to melodic augmentation, increasing tempo, and placement in a higher key than that of the Interludio Cantado, escalates the tension towards the song's climax at measure 54. Here, under the dynamic marking of fortissimo and a sudden change in expression marking (*Sempre Lento y Solemne*), all vocal parts join together in a homophonic finale. Juxtaposed with the disorienting mélange, this final phrase emerges with a clear message and a clear speaker: the day will come when the murderers will be brought to justice.

Thus, Advis employs both textual and musical devices in the Cantata's choruses that destabilize perspectival and temporal contexts. These effects create oneness, continuity, and empathy between the experiences of 1907 miners and 1970 activists. One of Quilapayún's founders, Eduardo Carrasco, shares his take on this aspect of the Cantata's function in his memoir *Quilapayún: la revolución y las estrellas*: "La 'Cantata' es, por encima de todo, un canto

[13] "You shouldn't be poor, friend, it's dangerous" (XVI. Canción).

de unidad…Su mensaje era una respuesta adecuada a los problemas que aquejaban a nuestra sociedad, donde la inmensa mayoría quería un cambio favorecera a los más deposeídos."[14]

While Carrasco's retrospective provides insight into the performers' own purposes in performing the piece, it also serves as a greater reflection on the sentiments behind Nueva Canción itself: a movement whose legacy continues to represent the voice of the working class in Chilean politics today. The *¡Chile Despertó!* movement began in the first weeks of October 2019, prompted by an increase of public transportation fares. Months later, it continue to captivate the world's attention as millions of Chileans call for a restructured government and increased accountability from their elected officials, and Chilean political parties have agreed to a referendum on a potential overhaul of the Pinochet-era constitution. Once again, the sounds of Nueva Canción serve as a uniting force between present and past as crowds sing Quilapayún and Sergio Ortega's *El pueblo unido jamás será vencido* and Victor Jara's *El derecho de vivir en paz* in unison. Chilean Interior Sub-Secretary Rodrigo Ubilla Mackenney recently announced the intention to acquire acoustic crowd control devices; a battle of organic sound versus forcible sound provides an apt metaphor for Chile's struggles both now and in the latter half of the 20th century.

In her 2014 article "'Remembrance is Not Enough...'/'No basta solo el recuerdo…'", Eileen Karmy Bolton examines resignifications of the Cantata, tracing its performances from Quilapayún's premiere and subsequent Pinochet-era exile performances through reimagination and performances of a 2007 rock version. By destabilizing voice within the original composition, Advis composed a work that makes resignification equally facile and powerful. However, power and resignification exist in varying degrees depending on the physical embodiment of the

[14] "The 'Cantata' is, above all, a song of unity...Its message was a suitable response to the problems that were afflicting our society, where the vast majority wanted a change that would favor the most dispossessed." Carrasco, 158–159; my translation.

sentiment “We fight for what is ours,” especially when we consider that this work has been almost exclusively performed by men. The text itself demonstrates that instability of perspective comes up against a gender borderline; Canción VII (titled “Vamos Mujer” in the index) implies a protective masculine presence in relation to his traveling companions, a woman and child. Thus, *Cantata Santa María de Iquique*’s flexibility of perspective might not be as ambiguous as it appears, which in turn may lead us to question whether its resolute message speaks for the entirety of the population it wishes to embody: the working class. If we take this piece as a case study within the broader oeuvre of Chilean Nueva Canción, the Cantata gives us leave to ponder what hegemonies reside within the works that counterhegemonic protesters still perform today.

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