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Los Estudiantes de Chile y la Nueva Canción

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Abstract

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During the Fall Quarter of my second year at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), I was enrolled in the course “Popular Musics of the World,” taught by Dr. René T.A. Lysloff, an Associate Professor of the Music Department at UCR. One section of the course addressed the Nueva Canción or “New Song” movement in Chile. I was inspired by what I learned about the solidarity of the Chilean people, expressed in remarkably empowering ways through music, and found the songs that were created during the movement to be extraordinarily beautiful. For one of our assignments, we had to choose a musical artist and write about his or her music’s impact. I chose to write about Victor Jara, one of the most notable singer-songwriters of the Nueva Canción movement. I dedicated more time and effort to this assignment than any other I had tackled since starting college, and after turning it in, I still wanted to learn more about the topic in order to inform others about this movement and the people who were involved. Consequently, I chose to focus on the Nueva Canción movement for this capstone project, knowing it would allow me to explore the subject from a different and deeper angle.

Nueva Canción Chilena

In the early 1960s, the people of Chile faced social inequalities. While United States corporations had private investments in Chile that were worth more than one billion dollars, only twenty-five percent of the people in Chile had access to sewage services, tens of thousands of people were living in shacks that had no plumbing, water, nor electricity, workers had few rights and lived in crowded spaces that were provided by the companies, and miners faced harsh living conditions as they lived near the mines (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 1). At the same time, the Cuban Revolution and the Vietnam War had stimulated a mass movement in Chile that was strongly anti-imperialist and supportive of progressive change (Cerdeña Moya 5). In 1964, the Christian Democratic Party won the national elections and Eduardo Frei became the new president, implementing moderate changes in an attempt to address people's demands (Cerdeña Moya 5). Students and workers were not satisfied with Frei's incremental approach, however, and became more aggressive in their calls for change. In 1970, the presidential election of socialist Salvador Allende, the candidate of the Popular Unity party, brought hope for the people of Chile, as he promised to end social inequalities (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 1). However, a military coup in 1973 led by Augusto Pinochet and supported by the United States government deposed Allende, after which people who had been associated with the Nueva Canción movement were imprisoned, due to its strong associations with the Allende administration (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 174). The students of Chile contributed to the Nueva Canción movement as both artists and as audiences, keeping the spirit of the movement alive even when the military coup sought to end it, and sustaining its spirit long after the coup. In my capstone project, including this essay and the poem above, I will show that without the efforts of Chilean

students, the life of the Nueva Canción movement would not have existed before, during, nor after the military coup.

Students in Chile participated in the movement by becoming artists, which helped the movement grow and thrive before the military coup. A group of engineering students formed a group called Inti-Illimani that composed songs for the Nueva Canción movement, traveled around the world to perform them, and even helped Allende's campaign (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 77). This shows that the students were directly involved in the musical aspect of the movement. If the students did not form their musical group, then they would not have been able to travel to perform their songs. Having the student group travel to sing the songs of the people contributed to the opportunity for many others to be aware of the struggles that the people in Chile were facing. The group even went to the places where people voted and told them that they were there because they were interested in Chile and in their lives, and the people told the group that no one had done that before (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 76). Inti-Illimani's joyful songs broke the ice between students and the people of Chile (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 76). The group's efforts helped the working class to know that the students were standing in solidarity with the working class. Therefore, this helped the working class to know that they were not alone in their attempts for social change.

While there were students who were contributing to the music of the movement, there were other students who helped to spread the message of the movement. In 1969, an anti-imperialist march occurred from Valparaíso to Santiago to protest the United States' military actions in Vietnam by painting murals (Rolston 115). Along their route, young Communist Party members painted slogans and later formed the group called Brigada Ramona Parra, which went on to paint murals all over Chile to promote the ideas of the Allende government (Rolston 115;

Cerda Moya 6). The fact that these were students shows that they were making time to focus on the politics of their country while they were still attending school. This demonstrates the dedication of the students, who chose to spend their free time in what they believed would benefit not only themselves but the people of Chile as a whole. The murals painted by the Brigada Ramona Parra before Allende's government had symbolism that was abstract, but after Allende's election they quickly changed their style to utilize simpler and more recognizable images (Rolston 117), as seen in figure 1 (Valenzuela 22). These changes made students more aware of their particular style of painting murals. This shows that the students were aware of the potential impact of their work by making sure that people would be aware of the message that they were attempting to spread with their murals. Therefore, the students were serious about their efforts to spread their support for the people of Chile. As shown in figure 2 (Valenzuela 22), while painting the murals, Brigada Ramona Parra would wear workers' hard hats to symbolize the fact that they were in solidarity with the working class, though they were originally worn for protection against possible attacks made upon them (Rolston 117). The students of the Brigada Ramona Parra were the ones that decided that they would change the use of a hard hat that was used to protect them to having the hard hat be used as a symbol to support the working class. Therefore, the students did not view their safety as a priority as they did not view the accessory as a way to protect themselves. Rather, they were extraordinarily invested in helping the people of Chile and showing others that they were in support of fighting for the working class.



Figure 1. One of Brigada Ramona Parra's murals from Valenzuela et al (22).



Figure 2. The members of the Brigada Ramona Parra are wearing hard helmet hats from Valenzuela et al (23).

Students were repeatedly acknowledged by the artists of the Nueva Canción movement for their contributions to the struggle to stop the oppression of the Chilean people. Victor Jara, a big Nueva Canción artist, went and spoke to the then-student group Inti-Illimani, proposing to work together to support candidates that wanted to end the oppression of the people (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 109). The fact that a student musical group worked with one of the biggest artists of the movement shows the mutual appreciation and support that each had for the other; in the case of Victor Jara, his formation of the student group Quilapayún (McSherry, “The Victor Jara” 54) and his work with Inti-Illimani demonstrate his understanding of the importance and the impact that students had on both the musical and the political movements of the time. In fact, Jara wrote the poem “Movil Oil Special” and Violeta Parra, another well-known artist of the time, wrote a poem called “Me Gustan Los Estudiantes (I like the Students)” in which they both showed their admiration for the students and their efforts and recognized their effectiveness in mobilizing other activists (Vilches 205; Oliva 209). When Celso Garrido-Lecca, a renowned composer and frequent collaborator of Victor Jara’s, was asked in an interview about a song that he and Jara wrote entitled “Brigada Ramona Parra,” he responded that the song was intended to bring awareness to the group of muralists (De La Sotta). The fact that Violeta Parra chose to name to her poem “Me Gustan Los Estudiantes” supports the idea that she wanted to show the public her support for the students and their efforts without even needing to listen to the song. The students had an important impact on the movement as they were being recognized for their dedication and hard work. Therefore, the artists themselves are acknowledging that, without the students and their efforts, the movement would not have been possible.

Even after the military coup, the students continued to keep the spirit of the Nueva Canción movement alive. In 1973, Allende asked for the direct vote of all the members of an

electorate to see if the Chilean people supported his presidency; however, in fear that the people would vote in supporting his presidency, the military launched a military coup to end Allende's presidency and imprison many people, including students (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 166). Eduardo Ojeda, a university student, recalls the time that he was imprisoned with Peyre, a student at the State Technical University, and Peyre began to sing "Ve y Díselo a la Lluvia (Go and Tell the Rain)," a song that talks about trying to stay calm in a time of sorrow and asked other students to join in. While the rest of the people that were imprisoned would listen to their performances, this led the students to form a musical group called Alpha 4 (Ojeda). Even though the students were imprisoned they did not lose hope. The students attempted to lift the spirits of the people that were imprisoned with them for the movement by singing songs that were made for comfort. Therefore, the students not only helped to create the movement before the military coup, but they also helped to keep the spirit of it alive after the coup and during the Pinochet dictatorship.

The effects of the efforts of the students continued to show that the hope of the movement, specifically the hope for social change, existed after the coup. Like the group of students in Brigada Ramona Parra that used murals to help Allende's campaign (Ross 266), many years later and even today, the new students in the Brigada Ramona Parra continue to use murals in the same style as a way to commemorate that earlier activism as well as protest for different current causes, such as railway workers' rights (see figure 3), reform of the education system (see figure 4), and the rights of indigenous peoples (see figure 5; Granlund 31). The fact that the new group of students today continue to use the same methods demonstrates how remarkably influential the early Brigada Ramona Parra activism remains. This also shows that the previous students were taken seriously, as students today hope to be by continuing their

methods. In that same spirit of activism and remembrance, the Brigada Ramona Parra created a mural that commemorated the people that were involved in the Nueva Canción movement to show that the endeavors of the people will live on as long as the dead are remembered and acknowledged (Figure 6; Rolston 129). Using simple and recognizable images that were used during the Nueva Canción movement, the new mural echoes the earlier style in a contemporary context (Rolston 117). As shown in Figure 6, Victor Jara was one of the people that were painted into the mural, paying respect to him after his death at the hands of the military, and in appreciation of his contributions to the Nueva Canción movement.



Figure 3. Part of a mural that was painted by Brigada Ramona Parra from Granlund and Silén (30).



Figure 4. Part of a mural that was painted by Brigada Ramona Parra from Granlund and Silén (31).



Figure 5. Part of the mural that was painted by Brigada Ramona Parra from Granlund and Silén (31).



Figure 6. Brigada Ramona Parra's mural from Rolston (129).

In conclusion, the efforts of the university students in Chile allowed for the Nueva Canción movement to exist and thrive before, during, and after the military coup. The students were actively involved with the nation's politics, especially as they ensured that the voices of the working people were heard. They also became part of the artistic aspects of the movement by creating songs and murals as part of their activism. Students were even recognized for their efforts by major artists of the movement. During and after the military coup, the students tried to keep the spirit of the movement alive. Even after the military coup and to the present, the efforts of the students during the Nueva Canción movement continue to be recognized and remembered through the murals and songs that they created, which are imitated and performed even today.

“Los Estudiantes”: Commemorating Student Activism and Music in Verse

For this project, in addition to researching the history of student involvement in the Nueva Canción movement, I also created a poem about the subject that is in the same style as those created by one of the most influential songwriters of the movement. Violeta Parra, an artist often referred to as the “godmother” of Nueva Canción, used the traditional Spanish and Chilean poetic form called the *décima* in many of her songs (Alvarado 58). Though variations on the *décima* exist throughout Latin America, the sung version typically consists of an opening quatrain (four-line verse), followed by four verses of ten octosyllabic lines each with the rhyme scheme ABBAACDDC (Orellana 194; Pasmanick 251). I chose to create my poem in the same way that Violeta Parra created her poems as a way to commemorate the Nueva Canción movement and its songs.

In the poem, I discuss the efforts of the students and the impact they had on the Nueva Canción movement. In the quatrain, the lines “movida de estudiantes... Así ayudaron a Chile” translate to “the movement of the students... that is how they helped Chile,” which introduces the fact that the students first attempted to help fix the national issues of Chile, which was at the time that the Nueva Canción movement arose (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 2). In the next verse, “ayuda de ingenieros, con ayuda de Brigada” shows some of the different type of students, such as engineers and students from the Brigada Ramona Parra, that helped spread the message of hope for social justice that defined Nueva Canción (McSherry, *Chilean New Song* 77; De La Sotta). In the next verse, I discuss the fact that the students were recognized and appreciated by the artists of the Nueva Canción movement (Vilches 205; Oliva 209). In the third long verse, I discuss the time of the military coup, during which everyone was involved in the movement was imprisoned or killed, and I also discuss the efforts of the students to keep the spirit alive, noting

that a musical group even came out of those efforts (Ojeda). In the last verse I wrote the lines “Con la continuación, continuó la inspiración... para obtener libertad” which translates to “with the continuation, the inspiration continued... to have liberty.” This line is meant to point out that the efforts of the students during the Nueva Canción movement were influential for both the students who came after them, and for the people of Chile as a whole as they continue to use the same methods to fight for social changes (Rolston 117).

Conclusion

With this capstone I wanted to bring awareness of the Chilean students’ efforts and their impact during the Nueva Canción movement to the public. I believed that this capstone has allowed me to work with the Nueva Canción movement in a fulfilling manner as I was able to research more on the topic and create a poem similar to the ones that were created for the movement. I believe that the awareness of the impact that these Chilean students had on the Chilean people will inspire people from different backgrounds, especially students, to work together and to fight for what they believe is right.

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