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BY LETICIA ISABEL SOTO FLORES

PERFORMATIVE METAPHORS

THE "DOING" OF IMAGE BY WOMEN IN MARIACHI MUSIC

IN MUSIC STUDIES, scholars have often explored music as a metaphor for emotions, thoughts, and life. In the 19th century, music critic Edward Hanslick recognized the inherent metaphorical sense of musical discourse. As he stated in 1891, "what in every other art is still description is in music already metaphor", (Hanslick 1986: 30). When verbalizing what music is, from representation to technique, one cannot avoid using figurative language, metaphors in particular, because a verbal description of *sound* is, of necessity, an interpretation.

In the first case regarding metaphors in music, metaphorical language is used to describe music in relation to musical practice or music theory. These metaphorical descriptions have unavoidably succumbed to the ideological horizons manifested through language. Musicologist Susan McClary refers to this as gendered aspects of traditional music theory in *Feminine Endings* (1991), a founding text in feminist musicology. She states: "music theorists and analysts quite frequently betray an explicit reliance on metaphors of gender ("masculinity" vs. "femininity") and sexuality in their formulations. The most venerable of these—because it has its roots in traditional poetics—involves the classification of cadence-types or endings according to gender" (McClary 1991: 9). Musicians and music critics utilize the terms "feminine endings" and "masculine endings" to describe how a cadence ends, most without ever realizing that these metaphors perpetuate sexual difference through musical language. In mariachi music, a similar situation has manifested with the increasing participation of women mariachi musicians. As more and more women perform in mariachi ensembles, the songs traditionally in a vocal register for men are necessarily transposed to suit the female voice. This alternative vocal register quickly became categorized as the "girl key," or *tono para mujer.* While the use of this gendered metaphor is colloquial, we cannot ignore the reality that the metaphors in music terminology rely explicitly on metaphors of gender. Metaphor is thus not merely a poetic aspect of music language; it is also a way in which individuals and communities conceptualize their "doing" through metaphorical language.

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PERFORMATIVE METAPHORS: THE "DOING" OF IMAGE BY WOMEN IN MARIACHI MUSIC

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In the second case, metaphors about music, metaphors do only represent the musical experience itself, but they also affect the way the music is to be experienced. These types of metaphors tend to both reflect and change one's experience of the music. McClary regards this as gender and sexuality in musical narrative: "Not only do gender and sexuality inform our "abstract" theories, but music itself often relies heavily upon the metaphorical simulation of sexual activity for its effects" (McClary 1991: 12). In the case of mariachi music, in the early 1990s when all-female mariachi ensembles began making their presence known on the U.S. concert stage, I remember many listeners describing their experience of the music with social codes taken to be "natural," those associated with femininity and masculinity. Judgments regarding their music included comments and complaints that it sounded "feminine," "weak," "slow," and that "something was missing." The music by all-female mariachi groups was not judged on musical qualities alone; instead the audience employed metaphorical language to characterize and express what the music meant to *them*, the listener. This was neither the macho masculine sound many were accustomed to, nor was it presented in the macho masculine image ubiquitously associated with mariachi music. Expressivity of judgments is not an attribute of the music; it is attributed *to* the music. In this sense, music serves as a metaphor for the significance of the experience, where the significance is founded on an ideological framework.

Although research concerning metaphor in and about music is common in music studies, I would like to propose an alternative way of approaching metaphor as it relates to performance. Philosopher John L. Austin, in coining the

word "performative," refers to the meaning of utterances, or spoken words, as the "doing" of the action that it accomplishes (Austin 1978: 5-6).1 Although this is the case with spoken words, what happens with the "doing" that has no words? For this, I refer to feminist Judith Butler's notion of "bodily action." In understanding the relationship between the speech act and the bodily act, Butler writes, "there is what is said, and then there is a kind of saying that the 'bodily instrument' of the utterance performs" (Butler 1997: 11). Actions are thus to be understood as performative metaphors, which are effective in bringing about the situation they represent, using an image rather than words.

The image created and negotiated by women mariachi musicians, both in their verbal descriptions of themselves as well as the non-verbal "doing" of their image, affirms the idea that a metaphor is not merely a linguistic mechanism; metaphors can also be performed, meaning that one does not have to "say" something to enact a metaphorical truth-value. A performance, for example, is a public action in which meanings are manifested into actions (and words) that stand for something else. In the following, I will illustrate briefly how metaphors can be performed, not through the music itself, but through the image presented by female mariachi musicians.

1. According to Austin, there are two types of performatives: 1) a perlocutionary act is "what we bring about or achieve by saying something," (consequences brought about by a speech act); 2) an illocutionary act is the act we perform "in saying something."

Figure 1: Example of the masculine mariachi image popularized with the Golden Era of Mexican Film

IMAGE IN MARIACHI MUSIC

Around the world, mariachi music is a powerful mode of cultural expression that has been predominantly recognized as a male-dominated musical tradition, despite the fact that women also play an integral role. Since the beginning of its worldwide popularity, the mariachi image has been utilized to represent a symbol of manliness—in part established by the National Charro Association's 1921 code of ethics—in addition to its significance as a symbol of Mexico.

Embraced as an emblem of Mexican identity during the nationalist movement in the 1930s, the mariachi image was constructed from a collection of symbols—such as the sombrero, the *traje de charro* (the stylized bullfighter outfit adopted by mariachi musicians), and pistol brandishing—all which collectively presented an image of Mexican maleness through films, television, and radio. Moreover, the masculine self-representation of

male mariachi performers has largely influenced the common perception of this musical expression, and it is this male conception that has been primarily accepted by much of the media and scholars of this performance practice.

In her article on the discourse surrounding the Mexican *charro*, Olga Nájera-Ramírez posits that the *charro* must be approached as both a national symbol and a cultural construction of maleness (Nájera-Ramírez 1994). Despite the fact that there is a feminine translation for the word *charro* (*charra*), mariachi musicians do not describe the female versions of the mariachi suit as a *traje de charra*. Women have nonetheless created and negotiated their image in a variety of creative ways. The following are only a few of the ways in which women mariachi musicians have innovated the *traje de charro*.

Figure 2: Mariachi Feminil Estrellas de Mexico handcrafted their own outfits. ***Courtesy of Felisa González, 2011***

Figure 3: Mexico City's Mariachi Xochitl was formed in 1982 by Ramona Madera Gálvez

ALL-FEMALE MARIACHI ENSEMBLES

In the 1950s in Mexico, three all-female mariachi groups were formed and directed by women in the Mexican capitol: Mariachi Las Adelitas by Adela "Adelita" Chávez, Mariachi Femenil Estrellas de México (initially called Mariachi Michoacano) by Lupe "Lupita" Morales Ayala, and Mariachi Las Coronelas (initially called Mariachi Noriega) by Carlota Noriega, actress and a musician. These women, instead of adopting a feminized version of the *traje de charro* while performing mariachi

music, they handcrafted their own outfits, most of them knee-length variations of Mexican regional dresses. Figure 2 shows Mariachi Femenil Estrellas de México in examples of the very dresses they concocted.

Since their formation in 1982, Mexico City's Mariachi Xochitl by Ramona Madera Gálvez had a different vision of how to highlight their femininity as an all-female mariachi ensemble (fig. 3). Despite the mass dissemination of the masculine image associated with the *traje de charro,* and the feminine examples set by the first all-female mariachi groups that preceded them, Mariachi Xochitl feminized their image by wearing short length skirts that came just above the knees.

In the United States, Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles de José L. Hernández, established in 1994, had the opportunity to perform for President Barrack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama and at the White House for their 2009 Cinco de Mayo celebration (fig. 4). For this celebration, among their large variety of suits, they chose to wear their purple *traje de charro* with a white sash draping from the right hip.

In San Antonio, Texas, Mariachi Mujer Internacional by Lucila Torres, formed in 2008, modified the charro image by adding a bright pink *reboso* (shawl) with a matching flower in their hair (fig. 5). The rebozo has a special significance to Mexican women; although warmly

Figure 4: Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles de José L. Hernández, established in 1994, performed at the White House in 2009.

Figure 5: Mariachi Mujer Internacional by Lucila Torres, formed in 2008, modified the charro image by adding a bright pink *reboso* (shawl) with a matching flower.

Figure 6: Mariachi Continental Femenil by Carla Bibiano Riveles employ a variety of mariachi suits that uniquely draw attention to the female body.

Figure 7: In Los Angeles, four women came together to create Mariachi Bella.

linked to indigenous and rural Mexican women, it emphasizes femininity across social classes.

In Jerez, Zacatecas, Mariachi Continental Femenil by Carla Bibiano Riveles employ a variety of mariachi suits that uniquely draw attention to the female body (fig. 6). In one example, they perform wearing a formal contemporary strapless dress with "botunadura" decorations, sometimes with a jacket, as shown below. In other occasions, they wear a strapless top with a long and colorful Mexican regional skirt.

More recently in Los Angeles, four women came together to create Mariachi Bella. Though they have the now-conventional female *traje de charro,* they also present their music wearing a fitted top and pants with a red flower in their hair (fig. 7).

Mariachi Femenil de América by María de Jesús Xolocotzi Mata and her husband, Armando Muñoz Vasquez, was formed in 2011 in Tlaxcala de Xicohténcatl, Tlaxcala. In designing their first *traje de charro,* María de Jesús chose to have a more traditional look, albeit with princess-cut jackets (fig. 8).

By developing their awareness of the signs and signals that serve as a language of their body, and by choosing to "do" their image in order to *perform* a female version of the historically masculine mariachi suit, women mariachi musicians metaphorically assert and contest that which individuals and communities once conceptualized as the norm: the *traje de charro.* The metaphoric assertions by women in mariachi today, seen as perhaps a metaphor of the role of women in musical activities, thus provoke enticing questions regarding tradition, judgment, and symbolic meanings.

SPEECH ACTS AND BODILY ACTIONS

In formal interviews and informal conversations with women mariachi musicians, many enthusiastically share what they do to make the mariachi image more feminine. Some describe the colors

Figure 8: Mariachi Femenil de América, formed in 2011 in Tlaxcala de Xicohténcatl, Tlaxcala, have a more traditional look, albeit with princess-cut jackets.

they choose for their attire, the length of skirt they prefer, whether they prefer skirts or pants, and some still critique women who choose not to wear the long "feminine" traditional skirt while performing mariachi music.

In addition to the desire to create a feminine image, there is the underlying notion of "the traditional" and "the proper." In a recent interview with Ramona Madera, director of Mariachi Femenil Xochitl, she felt the need to justify why they prefer wearing their short skirt, just above the knees. She explained that it was more convenient because the long skirts can be dangerous and their heels tend to get stuck in the hem, causing them to trip if they are not careful. She added that with the longs traditional mariachi skirts, they wouldn't be able to walk fast if they needed to.2 Truthfully, as she later revealed, they did not mind looking like sexy women mariachi musicians. Despite their reasons for wearing knee-length skirts, Mariachi Xochitl has a matching full-length skirt to use in front of audiences who prefer more "proper-looking" all-female mariachi groups.

The metaphoric assertion of Mariachi Xochitl's feminine, or even sexy, mariachi image is only one example in which the verbal description of their image may in fact complement the non-verbal "doing" of their image. The diverse attitudes that respond to these performative metaphors, many of which concern important notions of tradition,

2. Personal interview with Ramona Madera, 17 December 2011.

judgment, and symbolic meanings, have important effects on what should be preserved and what could involve change.

On Sunday, November 27, 2011, *El mariachi: música de cuerdas, canto y trompeta (Mariachi: string music, song, and trumpet)* was among eighteen new items of intangible world heritage to be added to the Representative List of the Intangible Culture of Humanity by the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO). The idea that it is now a responsibility of the Mexican government and the mariachi musicians themselves to preserve the music (which is ambiguously disdained) has shed new light on how female mariachi groups will be included in efforts to preserve this musical tradition, particularly since UNESCO's recognition aims to protect heritage—often interpreted as old—and all female groups are more recent.

PERFORMATIVE METAPHORS

Performative metaphors address embodied actions that capture emotion and expression in the fluidity and adaptability of human activity. They are associated with self-presentation, display, and interpersonal communication. In this sense, the metaphors performed account for an appropriation and transformation of the ubiquitous masculine mariachi appearance. Performance is not just about music; it is also about the bodily actions. Thus, a closer look at the performative actions, which are at the root of the preservation of performing arts, shed light on the quotidian metaphoric assertions made by women mariachi musicians today.

Performativity, thus, cannot be limited to metaphors in and about music. A closer look at how women mariachi musicians "do" their image takes into account not only what they wear and how they look, but also the performative metaphors that include the characteristics, attitudes, gestures, behaviors, and the musical manifestations themselves. All of these are subject to reflexive judgments that oscillate between preservation and change.

Leticia Isabel Soto Flores is a doctoral student in the Department of Ethnomusicology at UCLA. She presented a version of this essay at the plenary session, which was titled "Thinking Gender in Space, Place, and Dance."

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