

# Edwards, Erika

## The Marvelous American Reality: Making a Case for Carpentier's Magical Realism in Latin American Music

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In 1949 the Nobel Prize-winning Cuban novelist and musicologist, Alejo Carpentier, published his essay on *lo real maravilloso Americano*, an aggressively American discussion of the theory now known as magical realism. Carpentier refers to the German art critic Franz Roh (who initially coined the term in reference to post-expressionist painting in 1925), but diverges and defends magical realism as a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. While the world has latched onto Magical Realism as a critical literary theory, it is undeniably the Latin American authors and artists who have embraced, embodied and defined the practice of it. Carpentier asserts that the magical, mystical and imaginary is not to be discovered by transcending reality (as the surrealists claim), but that the marvelous is inherent in the natural and human realities of time and place, “where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America’s varied history, geography, demography and politics—not by manifesto.” (“On the Marvellous Real in America,” 75).

Therefore, if magical realism and Latin America are so intimately connected, it should follow that magical realism would be apparent in all of Latin America’s art forms. While it has been discussed as a critical theory for literature and the visual arts little application has been made to music. In fact, Franz Roh writes, “Objectivity is not equally important in all the arts. Music does not reproduce objects; it creates out of nothing, given the fact that its phenomena do not really attempt to refer to nature” (Roh, 18). In this statement, Roh exempts music from consideration and examination under the theory of magical realism.

In my research, I set out to prove that Roh’s claim is erroneous and make a case for magical realism in Latin American music. I began with the idea that the theory of Magical Realism was not born in a vacuum, and the fact that Carpentier was a respected Latin American musicologist who blended the texts and evocative qualities of music in his fiction, was only the beginning of the application of Magical Realism to Latin American music.

I realized that in order to understand the idea of Magical Realism, I had to understand its inception. I delved into the history of the theory, tracing it from post-expressionist art criticism in Germany to its circulation among new world elites, and discovering similar theories independently forming in the Americas, in the works of Borges and Carpentier. Once I had a solid understanding of the theory and its history, it became necessary to find out how it could be applied to Latin American music.

Since Carpentier is the one figure in whom the lines of theory, literature and musicology cross, I pored over his essays, novels and musicological research as well as biographies of his life. Carpentier, as I discovered, thought of himself as a musicologist first, and a writer second. His musicological research gave him the base not only for much of the content of his later novels, but for their structure and texture as well. This is no more apparent than in his novel, *Los pasos perdidos*, or *The Lost Steps*, whose aimless antihero is a composer by profession and a *criollo* by

birth. Fleeing his vacuous life in New York City, he takes a journey to the upper reaches of the Orinoco River in search of primitive musical instruments. His journey leads him to discover “the birth of music” and its magical roots. One passage in particular confirmed my thesis that magical realism can be and was always intended to be applied to music. Carpentier’s hero states, “My idea of relating the magic objective of the primitive plastic arts—the representation of the animal that gives power over its living counterpart—to the first manifestations of musical rhythm, the attempt to imitate the gallop, the trot, the tread of animals was highly ingenious....What I had seen confirmed, to be sure the thesis of those who argue that music had a magic origin” (The Lost Steps, 200).

Once I discovered how magical realism could be identified in Latin American music, my task was to find some examples and prove it. Basing my analysis on the model set forth in *Los Pasos Perdidos*, I chose three obvious examples of contemporary Latin American music illustrating completely different aspects of magical realism in music—through instrumentation (Xochipilli by Carlos Chavez), rhythm (Magalenha by Sergio Mendes) and lyrics (En el muelle de San Blas by Maná). An examination of these and other examples of modern Latin American music reveals a deep commitment to nature, to painting with sound the magical landscape of Latin America, and to representing the reality of a land and people whose daily lives are peppered with marvelous occurrences.

In the end, why would a study of magical realism in music be relevant in understanding the historical and contemporary culture of Latin America? The answer is simple. Music is the only art form to consistently reach the masses, and the dissemination of magical realism into various forms of contemporary popular Latin American music, not only through the poetry of its lyrics, but through the language of the music itself, will prove to be its broadest and perhaps, its best understood application. In understanding what magical realism is and why it has been so fiercely embraced by Latin American artists, a unique and deep understanding of Latin American culture can be reached.

I presented my research at the World Congress of the Vernacular in Puebla, Mexico in October, 2003. This type of research and application is wholly unprecedented as far as I know, and there remains much more to explore on this topic.

#### **Works cited:**

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