



Edgardo Civallero

Notes on musical instruments | 01

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Part 01



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NOTE 01

Eyes that sound like rattles

Page thirty-four, page thirty-nine, page forty-two...

Paragraph after paragraph, I turn the pages of *Musical and other sound instruments of the South American Indians*, the *opera magna* by Swedish ethnographer Karl Gustav Izikowitz. Published in 1935, the work is an enormous compendium of American Indigenous organology, based as much on bibliography as on museum artifacts and personal communications.

(But sparingly on the author's direct experience studying Indigenous sound artifacts in the Americas.)

I am browsing a chapter entitled "Rattles." Specifically, a section describing hoof rattles, among which deer rattles seem to be the most abundant. The author, after listing the most relevant instruments, is extremely interested in analyzing the role played by deer among the native cultures of all the Americas: the presence of the animals in mythology, in religious and magical practices, in daily life and, of course, in music.

And suddenly, as if unintentionally, among so many somewhat hollow reflections, this curiosity appears:

Another question is then why just the hoofs are used. In answer to this I wish to point out at once that occasionally other parts of the deer are used, although this is more unusual — as, for instance, inflated deer's eyes which contain a small pebble, among the Havasupai (pp. 45-46).

I read several times, because I don't believe it. But no, I'm not wrong: it talks about inflated eyes with a little stone inside. Dry? I guess. As if they were somewhat macabre jingles, perhaps with a ceremonial meaning, surely with a very faint sound...

I review the third edition of Waldman's *Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*. The Havasupai, the "People of the Turquoise Water", are an indigenous people of the Yuma linguistic family who have lived for at least eight centuries in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, in the state of Arizona, USA. I can find no data on their sound culture, but the fact that they used curious or somewhat strange musical / sound artifacts would not be a surprise: a good part of the Indigenous societies of southwestern USA and northern Mexico possess (or possessed, according to historical sources), within their organological heritage, elements that are not usually repeated in many other parts of the world.

I go back to Izikowitz. The bibliographic reference he provides to support the mention to the Havasupai rattles is incorrect. It is not the only erroneous one in the book, unfortunately. After a few twists and turns, I manage to locate the correct one: *Havasupai Ethnography*, a work by American anthropologist Leslie Spier, published in

1928 as part of the *Anthropological Papers* series of the American Museum of Natural History.

It takes me a while to find the document, but eventually I get a copy. I look for the quoted page. And there it is. In describing the making of the women's deerskin dresses, and how they decorated them with rattles, the author points out:

On old women's dresses these jingles include deer eyes (which lack special significance). They are prepared by cutting a tiny hole to drain the fluid within, blowing them up to dry, inserting a kernel of corn, and tying the aperture. Similar rattles are also threaded on the side fringes for a short distance down from the belt (p. 187).

They did not have a pebble inside, but a kernel of corn. (That's why one should always check the original sources of information). And, apparently, they had no special meaning. They were simply an ornamentation in the women's clothes. A sonorous ornament. Eyes that sounded like rattles. Small artifacts that, surely, would make women resonate softly as they walked.

In my book, Izikowitz keeps talking about rattles. The pages move before my eyes: forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight. I confess that now I read with more interest. Who knows what other surprises will I find...

References

Izikowitz, Karl Gustav. *Musical and other sound instruments of the South American Indians*. Göteborg: EBA, 1935.

Spier, Leslie. *Havasupai Ethnography*. New York City: The American Museum of Natural History, 1928.

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NOTE 02

Orellana's *arrabel*

One of the problems of historical, anthropological and ethnographic sources when providing organological information is that authors are generally neither familiar with the musical universe nor with the specific terminology to identify it. Thus, it is not strange to find, in old (and not so old) bibliographic sources, flutes called trumpets, trumpets called clarinets, clarinets called flutes, and the use of an ambiguous vocabulary, including terms such as "caramillos" or "gaitas" (particularly in old Spanish colonial texts, which many times are the basis of my work.)

This ambiguity found in the labels chosen by authors of the distant and recent past to name the sound artifacts they were trying to describe derives from one of the characteristics of human classification systems. These systems, inherent to any individual, are based on the comparison of what is observed —of what one wants to understand, name and/or classify— with elements already known from one's own cultural heritage, which corresponds to a specific territory, time, and group. Thus, a 16th-century Andalusian, Extremaduran or Manchegan would call "gaita" any narrow idioglottic clarinet, or even some types of flutes, but an Aragonese or a Galician would use the term for something else. A 19th-century Swede from an urban environment would speak of timpani, bassoons and cellos to refer to indigenous instruments, especially if he had had no previous contact with the peasant culture of his own land. And so on.

So, when faced with the analysis of a historical source, it is necessary to take references with tweezers and to understand the author's context: his/her place and time of origin, his/her language, his/her experience...

(To this must be added his/her fantasy. And that of his/her informants, very prone, at times, to provide false information or simple mockery to researchers — who usually represented invasion and coloniality.)

All this reflection comes from a note by Swedish anthropologist and archaeologist Erland Nordenskiöld, who, in his work *An Ethno-Geographical Analysis of the material culture of two Indian tribes in the Gran Chaco* (1919), draws attention to the chronicles of the journey of Spanish conquistador Francisco de Orellana, during his "discovery" expedition along the Amazon River in 1549.

The text, *Relación del nuevo descubrimiento del famoso río Grande que descubrió por muy gran ventura el capitán Francisco de Orellana* ["Relation of the new discovery of the famous Great River that Captain Francisco de Orellana discovered by great chance"], was written by Fray Gaspar de Carvajal, a friar who took part in the voyage. The *Relación...* was published in full in 1894 by Chilean scholar José Toribio Medina, as part of his work *Descubrimiento del Río de Las Amazonas* ["Discovery of the River of the Amazons"]. Later, in 1934, it was extensively revised by H. C. Heaton, and republished in 1942.

In that diary (Carvajal, 1942), a curious three-stringed chordophone is mentioned, which the chronicler, following the Castilian tradition, calls "arrabel."

When we were halfway down the river, the Indians followed us by water, because the captain ordered us to cross to an island that was uninhabited, and until nightfall the Indians did not leave us; and so we arrived at the island more than ten hours after nightfall, where the captain ordered us not to jump ashore because the Indians might come upon us; and so we spent the night in our brigantines, and when morning came the Captain ordered us to walk with great order until we left this province of San Juan, which has more than one hundred and fifty leagues of coast, populated in the aforementioned manner. And another day, the twenty-fifth of June, we passed between some islands that we thought were uninhabited, but after we found ourselves in the midst of them, there were so many people that we saw on the said islands, that it weighed us down; and when they saw us, they came out to us on the river on two hundred pirogues, each one carrying twenty or thirty Indians, and of them forty, and of these there were many: they came very brightly dressed with various insignia and brought many trumpets and drums, and organs that they blow with their mouths, and arrabeles that they have with three strings; and they came with so much noise and shouting and with so much order, that we were frightened (p. 34, transl. by the author).

"Arrabel" is an old way of naming the *rabel* or rebec, a traditional fretted stringed instrument of European peasants, employed in Spain to this day in certain rural contexts.

That the chronicler chose that particular chordophone for his comparison —and not a plucked or bowed vihuela, or a lute— is revealing. For him, the "arrabel" was a crude and uncultured instrument: more a noise-producing artifact than a source of real music. (It is worth mentioning that this vision about the *rabel* was maintained in Spain for centuries.)

Carvajal's seems to be the only existing reference on stringed instruments in the shores of the Amazon River. But it is not the only one in that part of the continent. In the "eighth decade" of his *Décadas de Orbe Novo*, Italian chronicler (but in the service of the Spanish crown) Pedro Mártir de Anglería speaks of a similar instrument that he found in use in the region of Chiribichí (present-day Santa Fe, Sucre state, Venezuela), made with large seashells through which strings were crossed.

These are probably early borrowings and imitations of both Iberian and African instruments. Other examples of similar "arrabeles" are found among the Guyana people (Roth, 1924), among the Guarayo and the Caingang (Frič collection in Prague), and among the Nahuatl and the Huasteco peoples in Mexico (Basauri, 1928). But all of these, interesting in themselves, will be discussed on another occasion.

References

Carvajal, P. Gaspar de. *Descubrimiento del Río de las Amazonas*. [Relación de Fr. Gaspar de Carvajal exfoliated from the work of José Toribio Medina, Seville edition, 1894]. Bogotá: Prensas de la Biblioteca Nacional, 1942, p. 34.

Nordenskiöld, Erland. *An Ethno-Geographical Analysis of the material culture of two Indian tribes in the Gran Chaco*. [Comp. Ethn. Studies, 1]. Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1919, p. 168.

NOTE 03

The origin of South American clarinets

When reviewing reference works on organology, it is very common to find heated debates about "origin stories." Where did such and such instrument come from? Who was the inventor, the initial creator? How did it get elsewhere? What connections exist between it and other instruments?

(Such discussions can have different motivations, including purely chauvinistic ones: claiming national ownership of a particular sound artifact.)

One such "story," apparently still under construction, is that of the South American clarinets.

The single reed instruments, popularly known —thanks to the current organological classification of European origin— as "clarinets," are well known among South American indigenous societies, especially those of the Amazonia and the Orinoquia. Among them they receive different names— as many as languages spoken by their builders and interpreters. However, again thanks to European intervention (and its ethnographic literature), one of the best known designations, sometimes used as a generic name, is *toré*.

There are idioglottal (the reed is cut from the mouthpiece of the instrument) and heteroglottal (the reed is external to the mouthpiece and is attached to it by means of a loop). And there are those with the mouthpiece uncovered (which is put inside the performer's mouth to put it to vibrate through air pressure) or with air chambers inside which the mouthpiece is located. Among the latter are the already-mentioned *toré*: originally a clarinet of the Wayampi people of Guyana, whose name came to serve as generic for any type of aerophone with similar morphological features.

One of the most common questions among anthropologists, ethnologists, and musicologists since the end of the 19th century was the origin of these instruments. Since they have not been found in South American archaeological record nor are they mentioned in early literature —they appear there from the 18th century onwards— many authors, among them the Swedish musicologist Karl Gustav Izikowitz, have hypothesized that they are post-Columbian.

Such authors have not considered that the area of diffusion of these clarinets (the current area, at least) does not have important archaeological sites, and that the very nature of the materials with which the clarinets are built —cane, wood, gourd and vegetable fibers, perishable elements in the hot and humid climates of the Amazon and Orinoco basins— means that the remains, if existed, would not have been preserved. Likewise, the chroniclers who described in detail the features of the indigenous societies that inhabited those territories did not reach them until well into the 18th century, which is why there would be no earlier texts.

There is yet another issue. If the clarinets were in fact post-Columbian, would they be of European influence? If so, the gigantic *toré*, with its air chamber, or the elaborate *isimói* of the Warrao people, with several pieces joined with wax and a heteroglottal reed that exceeds in length that of the main body of the instrument itself... on which European instrument would be based?

There is the possibility, of course, of an African influence, although neither the *toré* nor the *isimói* (to continue with the two already-used examples of the amazing diversity of native South American single reed aerophones) can be connected with African examples.

That being said, some specimens show a decisive influence of the European peasant clarinets and of some of the most traditional aerophones of West Africa. The instruments of the Wayuu people of the Guajira peninsula (*sawawa*, *ontorroyoy*) and of the Yukpa people of the Serranía del Perijá (*timi*, *taparukcha*) show influences that can be both Iberian and African, while the famous *caña 'e millo* or *pito atravesao* of Colombian folklore has, with all certainty, an African origin.

Thus, there would be a clear presence of three instrumental traditions regarding South American clarinets. And, in all probability, many dialogues among them. With all that it means in terms of structures, designs, use of materials, construction and interpretation techniques, and repertoires...

An example of such interaction is the *erque* or *erquencho* of the Andes: the only instrument of this type currently present in the highlands of South America. Morphologically, it shows direct connections with instruments from northern Spain, such as the Cantabrian *berrona* or the Asturian *chifle*, but its playing technique (touching the reed with teeth or tongue to alter the pitch of the sound) and the melodies it emits are absolutely local.

In the end, the fact is that there is not always a unique and clear "origin story"... no matter how hard certain scholars have insisted on constructing them, eliminating in the process an incredible amount of amazing and rich diversity.

NOTE 04

The bullroarers' magic

I clearly remember that it was at a popular festival in a village in the Guadarrama mountains, in the north of the community of Madrid, in Spain.

The musical ensemble Mayalde, famous in Castilla and Leon (and surroundings) for their interpretations of the most traditional Castilian music —with a strong emphasis on the use of everyday sound artifacts and peasant music, and with a great sense of humor— was performing. Eusebio Martín, the most visible face of the group, stood in the middle of the stage with a *zumbadora*. What English-speaking organological sources generically call "bullroarers": an oval piece of wood, tied to a string. Eusebio spoke about the old beliefs associated with the instrument, about its ancient uses, and about how, with the passing of decades and centuries, the element ended up becoming a simple entertainment for children.

He then spun the bullroarer above his head, and the device emitted a low humming sound. "Many of you will think this is a silly child's toy," he said. "But the atavism is still here, in this little piece of wood. If you don't believe me, take this, go out in the middle of the woods, all by yourselves, at midnight, and buzz it. And see if you're not scared shitless..."

Indeed, bullroarers are believed to have had strong magical and ceremonial meanings in the past; among other things, they were used to ward off evil spirits in Europe and Asia. In fact, in some peasant, indigenous and traditional societies around the world they still serve these functions.

In South America they had a notable historical presence. Colbacchini (1925: 32) notes that among the Bororo people of the Brazilian Mato Grosso, bullroarers, which they called *aiĝe*, could be seen only after the men's initiation ceremony. For his part, Nimuendajú (1956: 107) indicates that among the Apinayé people of the state of Tocantins, again in Brazil, their name was *megaló*, which also meant "dead man's soul."

The great majority of bullroarers in South America used to be performed by tying them to the end of a stick. The size varied, reaching up to one meter in length, and they tended to have very specific characteristics, such as shape—a fish shape was classic among the Apurinã and Nahukuá peoples of Brazil— or color; the red urucú-based *nonnogo* or the black *berago* used by the Bororo to dye them were distinctive.

In addition to the indigenous societies mentioned above, bullroarers were traditionally employed by the Baniwa, Embera, Wounaan, Chané, Aba, Curuaya, Timbira, Carayá, Wichí and Caduveo peoples (and are not present, curiously, in the Andes or Patagonia). In all of them, in one way or another, bullroarers had a certain ritual or shamanic significance. As time went by, they lost it, and ended up in the hands of the children...

...as has happened with a good number of other traditional sound artifacts, generally of simple structure and associated with rituals and beliefs that have fallen into oblivion.

Although it is enough to spin a bullroarer and make it groan and growl for a whole mass of atavistic memories and fears of past generations, apparently engraved in our collective memory —ghosts and death, darkness and the forest...—, to revive as if by magic.

As Eusebio, of Mayalde, used to say.

References

Colbacchini, Antonio. *I Bororos Orientali "Orarimugudoge" del Matto Grosso (Brasile)*. Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1925.

Nimuendajú, Kurt. *Os Apinayé*. Belém de Pará: Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia, 1956.

NOTE 05

So simple, so complex

Some sonorous artifacts are very complex in their simplicity.

This is the case of a series of aerophones that belong to the family of flutes with external air duct.

Such a family includes wind instruments in which the air duct, the channel that carries the player's breath to the bevel where the air jet is "cut", is located outside the main body of the flute — as opposed to those in which the air duct is included in the body of the instrument itself, such as the typical recorders, or the *pinkillos* of the Andes, or the Irish whistles.

That duct, whose presence and location defines an entire family, can be a metal tube, a segment of fine reed, the quill of a large feather, a piece of wood or clay, a section of plastic... The material is actually indifferent, as long as it leads the blow to the bevel.

And that bevel, which can vary from a small shallow recess to a deep and big notch, can be located on a multitude of body types — with different shapes, dimensions, materials and mechanisms. The diversity is overwhelming. So are the sounds produced, and the repertoires performed with them.

Among the best known examples of flutes with an external air duct are the Colombian *gaitas*, and the indigenous instruments on which they were inspired: the "wax-headed flutes" and the "axe-flutes", which are still made and used from Mexico to western Venezuela.

But those instruments are extremely complex.

Simpler examples include globular whistles made by South American indigenous societies from seeds and fruit stones.

Such flutes are apparently found only among the Apinayé people of the Brazilian state of Tocantins, and the Canela people (an umbrella term for the Ramkokamekrá, Apanyekra and Kenkateyeen groups) of northeastern Brazil.

In general, they are composed by a small reed (the air duct) tied or glued with wax to a hollow or hollowed fruit stone (the body), which can be substituted, eventually, by a small gourd. The reed is covered in cotton thread, and it is inserted inside the body of the aerophone; in that point, a wax deflector can be placed, which serves to concentrate the air of the blow on the bevel. The body can serve as a simple resonator for a single note, or it can be provided with fingering holes to modulate the sound and obtain a certain (limited) number of notes.

The flute, moreover, can be single... or multiple. Of the two specimens belonging to this category, preserved in the museum of Göteborg (Sweden), and collected among the Apinayé by Curt Nimuendajú in 1931, one of them is double.

Returning to the idea of the beginning, some sonorous artifacts are very complex in their simplicity. A good part of them formed the basis of traditional music since the human species began to weave sounds. Unfortunately, simple things don't seem to attract attention anymore.

