



*Invited lecture/Scientific contribution*

# The Mesoamerican Sound Heritage in Current Argentinian Music for Flute

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## **Abstract:**

The theme of the discussion is the influence of Mesoamerican culture legacy in the Argentinian contemporary music for flute. The aim of the article is to analyse the piece "Coyolyantototl" (in Náhuatl language meaning place of action of the rattle bird) for Pre columbian flute, flute and recitation in Náhuatl (one performer) composed in 2021 by Federico Núñez and dedicated to Argentinian- Italian flutist Ana Ligia Mastruzzo. Also it was the aim of the article to find the connections between Mesoamerican legacy and the actual musical productions in Latin America.



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**Keywords:** Mesoamerican culture; music; Flute; Mexicas; Contemporary music; Prehispanic instrument

## 1. Introduction

Mesoamerican culture has left its mark over time and, without a doubt, its great influence on the musical thinking of Latin American composers. The present work aims to give a perspective on contemporary Argentine flute music, emphasizing these cultural influences and how they are reflected in current artistic creation in the aforementioned region. For this, it was decided to analyse the case of the piece *Coyolyantototl* by the Argentine composer Federico Núñez, written in 2021 and dedicated to the author of this article. There will be a tour of musical interpretive aspects, the pre-Columbian instrument and the Nahuatl language used in the piece.

## 2. The case of the piece *Coyolyantototl*

In recent years, I have been working closely with the Argentine composer and guitarist Federico Núñez in the creation of the work *Trilogía Mexica* for flute, pre-Columbian double flute and recitation in Nahuatl language, conducted by one interpreter.

The work, as its name says, consists of three pieces:

1. *Kuikatl* (singing in Náhuatl language) for solo bass flute
2. *Quetzali* (the woman who was born to be beautiful or, feather in Nahuatl language) for solo piccolo flute
3. *Coyolyantototl* (the place of action of the rattle bird in Nahuatl language) for flute, double clay flute and recitation in Náhuatl (for one interpreter).

It is in the third piece of the *Trilogy* that we see with greater emphasis the approach to Mesoamerican culture and heritage in current flute music, since it is in it that the Náhuatl language is used, on the one hand, and on the other, of an instrument of the Mexican culture: the ceramic double flute (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Ceramic double flute replica made by argentinian ceramist Esteban Valdivia played by Ana Ligia Mastruzzo in concert at Conservatorio Superior de Música “Manuel de Falla” in Buenos Aires, on the premiere of chamber opera *Mexica Otlatocalitzli* by Federico Núñez in August 2022. Photo by Cecilia Salas.

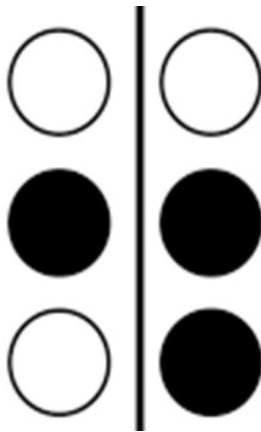
Coyolyantototl, for transverse flute; Pre-Hispanic ceramic double flute and recitation in Náhuatl (an interpreter) is a piece made up of three parts: 1 – “Teotl (God of movement); 2 – “Oncuicatinemi” (Go singing) ; 3 – “Totol” (Bird) and invites the listeners to immerse themselves in an imaginary Mesoamerican past through the combination of the timbres of the original language, the replica of a Mesoamerican clay flute and a modern Western instrument such as the transverse flute. In this way the aesthetic idea consists fundamentally of exploring timbre combinations in the performance game that occurs during the piece. The encounter of Mesoamerican and Western civilization occurs from the organic of the musical piece.

The work was published in 2021 by the North American publishing house Cayambis Music Press<sup>1</sup> and is part of Ana Ligia Mastruzzo’s upcoming record, an integral of all the pieces for flute by Federico Núñez.

### 2.1. The double clay flute and the musical notation

Regarding the use of the instrument in the mentioned piece, the ceramic double flute, we can say that in Mesoamerican culture they have all kinds of flutes, except the transverse and nose flutes: plunger, spring loaded with double diaphragms flutes type quena, recorders, bitonal ocarina doubles in the form of a pair of birds and bitonal ocarina with vibrator depicting a mother nursing her child.

This double flute consists of two tubes with twin fingerings, so there is a possibility of playing different ways. Being made up of two similar tubes of the same length, and being built by hand without moulds, the resulting acoustic effect is that a close vibration or *battimento* is generated when the flute is blown. In the Coyolyantototl score there are the fingerings that were developed by the composer. They are very clear: the left hand corresponds to the left side of the line and the right hand to the right side (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2:** Example of fingering used in the piece Coyolyantototl

The notation for this instrument is an original creation developed by the composer for this type of instrument, since there is no conventional musical notation for it. It was tested by Ana Ligia Mastruzzo as the composition of the work developed, in a roundtrip between composer-performer. In this way, it was possible to verify the effectiveness of the unprecedented notation from the beginning of the composition.

<sup>1</sup> Information about the music sheet in Cayambis Music Press web site: <https://www.cayambismusicpress.com/federico-nunez-coyolyantotol-p/cmp-1580.htm>



There are some precedents for this type of notation development that can be found, for example, in the works of the Bolivian composer Cergio Prudencio, who also works in this way (commented by Sebastián Zuleta, a member of the Bolivian Experimental Orchestra of Native Instruments (OEIN) founded by Prudencio, (Zuleta, 2007):

“Since these instruments do not belong to the European ‘cult’ music tradition, and trying to find a notation more similar to the traditional conception, C. Prudencio writes in positions. It is specified in a graph which holes must be covered and/or uncovered and that is a position, for which the sign of an approximate pitch on the staff is determined”<sup>2</sup>.

As this flute is an instrument that is outside the tempered system and convention, the composer reported in his Master degree thesis “La obra para guitarra sola de Fernando Maglia: Relación entre técnicas de ejecución y lenguaje” (Núñez, 2017) that he worked “following the manner of Luciano Berio, specially at the Sequenza 11<sup>th</sup> for Guitar where the tuning of the six strings provides the guitar language (Porcaro, 2003), and other composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idiomatic language of the instruments, this is contemplating not only the technical possibilities but fundamentally, the organological nature of the same”.

### 1.3 About the performance: music and words

For the performance of this piece, the double flute should be hung on the neck to facilitate the movements of the performer. The piece requires a lot of skill to go from one instrument to another and from instrument to voice. This flute hangs while the transverse flute can be left on a table or on a flute stand.

We can notice an alternation of onomatopoeias and Náhuatl language. These onomatopoeias serve as a link in order to acquire the continuity of the piece and enable the performer to move from one instrument to another. It is recommended to use an amplification that allows to balance the sound planes of the voice and of the instruments. The texts were provided by mexican poet Cuauhtémoc Vite. They are translations of some anonymous poems. The compiler refers in this regard:

“I took the idea from Giovanale Ancina, of creating or adapting “spiritual” texts for an oratorian purpose – spiritual or religious – with dialogues in short verses to give the adequate expression of vividness that is required. And from the same oratory, the text could be recited –chronista– as in the puppet altarpieces, in the style of “El retablo del maese Pedro”, by De Falla.”<sup>3</sup>

The texts used in their original language and also translated into English are transcribed below.

<sup>2</sup> “Al no pertenecer estos instrumentos a la tradición de música ‘cult’ europea, y tratando de encontrar una notación más afín a la concepción tradicional, C Prudencio escribe en posiciones. Se especifica en una gráfica cuáles orificios deben ser tapados y/o destapados y eso es una posición, para la cual se determina el signo de una altura aproximada en el pentagrama” (The traduction is my own).

<sup>3</sup> Conversation between Núñez and Vite.



## COYOLYANTOTOTOL (PLACE OF ACTION OF THE RATTLE BIRD)

### 1- TEOTL (GOD OF MOVEMENT, OF BECOMING)

#### OPENING SERMON \ OFFERING

Noncuica yehyan, noteuh.

Zan yehuan,

Ipal nemohua,

Ah notecu.

....

My song it is for him, who is my God.

Only he,

the giver of life,

Ah, my God.

### 2- ONCUICATINEMI (GO SINGING)

In coyolyantototl, oncuicatinemi, xochimana.

Zan ca tlauhquechol!

Piltotosin, ¿kenke ticuica?

Na nicuica pampa niyoltok

Na nicuica pampa nitlayejyekmati

Ni cuica xochihuiconticac ye noyolio.

....

The rattlesnake bird is singing, offering flowers.

Red bird with a rubber neck!

Little bird, why are you singing?

I sing because I have life

I sing because I see beautiful things

I sing with flowers covering my heart

### 3- TOTOTL(trans. God of movement)

#### BEGINNING OF THE SONG DIALOGUE

In izquixochitl, cacahuaxochitl,

Ah zan xochicacahuatl

In puzontimani,

Ocquihualya xochiaoctli y ya!

Ma ya netotilo,

Ma necuicatilo!!!

....

Fragrant flower, precious flower,

The flourishing cacao

already has foam,

Let's drink the florido liquor!

Let the dance begin,

the dialogue of the songs begins!!!

It is highly recommended that the performers have experience and knowledge in recitation and theater to be able to better approach this work and any other that requires the use of the voice by the interpreter.

The piece contains a series of questions to take into account at the time of its study and interpretation. Regarding the recitation, this is always clarified in the score with a rhythm to be respected that serves as a guide for the cadence of the words and syllables, without therefore having to be strict or too rhythmic. It must flow naturally. In the first piece, the voice is recited in the form of a whisper, respecting the indicated rhythm and using onomatopoeias « nu » that are interspersed between the sounds of the transverse flute and



the double flute. Here the interpreter must achieve a sound environment of lightness and fluidity, thinking of the God of movement that names the piece. There is a non-linear timbre transfer between the flutes where finally the double flute together with the onomatopoeias closes the number. In this way, a kind of timbral modulation is generated from the transverse flute to the double flute, carried out gradually, where the Náhuatl language functions as a link or as a distracting element.

In the second part the recitation is spoken and functions as an introduction that begins the section playing exclusively on the ceramic double flute. The spirit here is that of joy, it is an ode to beauty, to birds, to song, to love. It is very important to feel confident with the fingerings and to explore the sounds of this new instrument in order to convey the spirit of the piece. It is recommended to memorize the double flute section in order to feel comfortable with this flute. The last part has an indication of interpretation: « mechanical », here the interpreter must be very rhythmic and forget the lyrical issues of the previous part. It is a fast piece that requires a lot of skill to move quickly from one flute to the other and from flute to the whispered sections with onomatopoeias or the *bocca chiusa*. The text, unlike the two previous pieces, is inserted in the course of the work.

Given the characteristics of the piece, we find ourselves before a « new virtuosity » that is not the traditional one of the romantic pieces of European academic origin, but is typical of the world of contemporary music that shows new musical expressions seeking to break away from the Western academic tradition without denying its existence. Local features are mixed with the vestiges of tradition and European compositional techniques. The composer Mario Lavista defined this concept in his speech in Mexico (Lavista, 2010),

« The new virtuosity is one that contemplates a whole series of studies and searches for technical and expressive resources and possibilities absent from the classical instrumental tradition. It is not, in any way, about changing the nature of the instruments or destroy them ; You just have to listen carefully to discover in them a surprising diversity of voices and unusual worlds of sound. In this way, we participate and contribute to this slow and dignified transformation that instruments and their technique have undergone through the centuries. And it is the composer and the interpreter who contribute to it by trying to understand the complex nature of these alterations, of those innovations whose *raison d'être* resides, to a great extent, in the conflict that arises between the musical idea and the technique of execution. »<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *Coyolyantototl*, it goes much further than using invented melodies as composers such as Alberto Ginastera, Pascual De Rogatis, Silvestre Revueltas, Heitor Villa-Lobos and others have done ; here the protagonism is given by the replica of the ceramic instrument that contributes to the piece its organological characteristics and with it its own interpretative complexity. The double flute is in no way intended to resemble and imitate the transverse flute, but on the contrary, the piece is structured around it in such a way that the transverse flute and the voice modulate and transform to create an amalgamated sound unit.

A relevant aspect that requires extensive study and that will not be dealt with here is the dualistic Mesoamerican worldview that is manifested in the entire culture of the region and, as far as we are concerned, in the double structure of this flute.

### Conclusion

The musical piece *Coyolyantototl* represents a paradigmatic creation of the rapprochement between Mesoamerican and European cultures that challenges the interpreter in endless questions to address, from interpretive-performative to cultural aspects. It is also true in

<sup>4</sup> “El nuevo virtuosismo es aquel que contempla toda una serie de estudios y búsquedas de recursos y posibilidades de orden técnico y expresivo ausentes de la tradición clásica instrumental. No se trata, de ninguna manera, de cambiar la naturaleza de los instrumentos o de destruirlos; simplemente hay que escucharlos con atención para descubrir en ellos una sorprendente diversidad de voces e inusitados mundos sonoros. De esta forma, participamos y contribuimos a esa lenta y digna transformación que los instrumentos y su técnica han experimentado a través de los siglos. Y son el compositor y el intérprete los que contribuyen a ella tratando de comprender la naturaleza compleja de esas alteraciones, de esas innovaciones cuya razón de ser reside, en gran medida, en el conflicto que surge entre la idea musical y la técnica de ejecución”. (Traduction of my own).





terms of the treatment of stylistic and instrumental resources, since it marks an unprecedented way of connecting different musical cultures through its own new musical grammar that is manifested throughout the course of musical discourse. Language, in this way, is freed from all rigidity and acquires formal relationships that are legitimized in the creation itself. The interpreter opens up a huge and rich panorama of issues to know. Several aspects that emerge from this musical composition and from this article remain to be delivered into the future, such as the use and importance of the Náhuatl language as a poetic-sound element, the particular conception of time and dualism in pre-Hispanic cultures and its influence on the creation and use of Mesoamerican musical instruments.

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