

Fusión

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Fusión and *música de fusión* are umbrella terms used in Venezuela to denote new compositions by popular music artists and groups who use elements from folk music without producing a recognizable traditional folk piece, and in which formal, instrumental, linguistic, stylistic and conceptual propositions are different, personal and experimental in nature.

Fusión is separate from the nationalist intentions of academic composers, although it involves similar music procedures, being active within the field of popular music.

Fusión artists may be found within a wide spectrum of music ideas, from simple use of a folk rhythm to digital experimentation with folk instruments. In the early twenty-first century it may still be too early in its development to be able to group tendencies together, but a recurrent influence, similarly to that in neofolklore, has been the integration of highly skilled performers of symphonic instruments with the folk and pop music worlds. The main characteristics of *fusión* are:

- Professional music productions (live and recorded) of new compositions with elements of traditional folk music
- No specific folk piece is recognizable
- Different formal, instrumental, linguistic, stylistic and conceptual propositions from traditional folk music
- Personal and experimental in nature
- Specific to popular music, although may come into contact with the academic music world

As in neofolklore, the use of folk instruments with different music assures an imprint of traditional folk culture, as well as the use of folk music styles with non-folk instruments. Antonio Lauro, guitarist-composer, who lead one of the first important popular music groups in 1935, the Cantores del Trópico, created many guitar compositions with Venezuelan folk rhythms, such as the series of *Valses venezolanos*, the *Merengue para guitarra*, *Seis por derecho*, *Pasaje aragüeño*, among many others. With his guitar compositions, Lauro has become part of the basic program of all classical guitar schools in the world, and at the same time his music has remained very popular, despite the fact that the guitar has never been a prominent instrument in Venezuelan folk music, with the exception of a declining role in *joropo central* music.

The *cuatro*, as the national instrument, appears in almost all of the country's folk music, but its role has been always reserved to one of an accompanying instrument. In the 1950s, Freddy Reyna turned it into a solo virtuoso instrument, transcribing folk repertoire into tablature, publishing a method in 1957 followed by a series of recordings, and a new, improved method for the *cuatro* in 1996, five years before his death. Reyna's work was expanded by Hernán Gamboa in the 1970 and by Cheo Hurtado of Ensamble Gurrufío, from the 1980s onwards. Young *cuatro* performers have since taken the instrument to new frontiers, including jazz, where the folk reference is considerably lessened, as in the case of the *cuatro* group C4 Trío.

Fusión means in Spanish to join or mingle, and in the developing of new popular music it applies preferentially to the mixing of different rhythms to produce a new one. This is what Aldemaro Romero achieved and became famous for, first with his orchestral arrangements of Venezuelan folk and pop music in his album *Dinner in Caracas* in 1952, and later by mixing *bossa nova* with Venezuelan rhythms within a band concept to create a new style, *onda nueva* (New Wave) in 1971. Another successful example of *fusión* music in

Venezuela is the world hit 'Moliendo Café' by Hugo Blanco in 1959, the most covered song in Latin America. Using the *cuatro*, the Venezuelan *joropo llanero* harp, the maracas, güiro, the first electric bass in the country and the *son clave* in 3-2, he created a song with an intro in the Andalusian cadence and a rhythm with a Caribbean flavor which he named *ritmo orquídea*. In this the ternary meter of the folk repertoire with which the harp and the *cuatro* were identified is adapted to sound in a four-beat, binary-subdivided rhythm.

An important popular music group named Guaco was formed in 1960 and grew in the west part of Venezuela, in the city of Maracaibo. Using the traditional rhythm of the *gaita zuliana* as its base, in its different forms which are traditionally performed at Christmas time, Guaco succeeded in detaching the *gaita* from its folk-calendar tradition and creating a personal 'Guaco sound.'

Further developments of *fusión* music introduced simultaneously all kinds of variations, including instrumental switching, rhythmic mixing, to changes in the social function and contexts. From 1967, the large production of original *canciones de protesta* (protest songs) by Alí Primera included the use of Venezuelan folk rhythms and instruments, enhancing the cultural and social relationship of his music. Within the rock influence of the early seventies, Vytas Brenner, of German origin, produced an important track, 'Frailejón,' in his record *Ofrenda*. Here he mixed the harp of the *joropo llanero* with a rock band and Latin percussion. This tendency was immediately followed by the jazz pianist Gerry Weil, from Austria, mixing Venezuelan rhythms in his influential, experimental group La Banda Municipal in 1973-74, leaving only an old concert recording, *En Vivo* recently edited in 2008. Gerry Weil has continued to produce original *fusión* music in different instrumental combinations until today, a permanent resident of the country and jazz teacher of generations.

The Orquesta de Instrumentos Latinoamericanos ('Odila'), established as a *grupo de proyección* in 1982, included in its concert program a Latin American folk repertoire as well

as commissioned experimental compositions for a thirty-member orchestra of folk and indigenous instruments. Compositions such as *Etnocidio* by Emilio Mendoza, its director until 1987, were part of this alternative repertoire, which was bringing together indigenous, folk, pop and academic influences.

It is common for solo singers in Venezuela to experiment with folk music in one way or another. María Rivas, a successful jazz singer appearing as soloist in 1987, experimented with Afro-Venezuelan rhythms and *zoropo* folk music. Carlos Baute learnt to play and dance folk music in the *Talleres de Música Popular* (Workshops of Popular Music) of the Bigott Foundation in Caracas, before adventuring himself in his *Orígenes* albums of 1994 and 1997. Within Latin-Ska and Reggae, groups such as King Changó included an amplified *cuatro* in the track in their music, such as ‘Confesión’ in 1997, made possible by the new technology of the luthier Luis Ruiz in Caracas of his ‘Gordation’ *cuatro* series similar to the electro-acoustic Ovation guitars.

An additional musical influence from the symphonic, academic world completes the ingredients of the Venezuelan *fusión* development, which has already been observed in the neofolklore music, as a by-product of the youth symphonic movement. Academic instrumental virtuosity with extended compositional procedures has reached the production of popular music that is at the same time folk in essence. The neofolklore groups that started in the 1980s eventually progressed to experiment with *música de fusión*, such as the compositions for El Cuarteto and for the Ensemble Gurrufío, involving symphonic orchestras. Gurrufío conducted in 2001 a project known as the ‘Camerata Criolla’, in the same direction as the Odila two decades before, but for a hybrid-chamber ensemble. They commissioned and performed works by composers such as Paul Desenne with his *El Reto*, crossing the border again between academic and pop music with this initiative.

Numerous groups and soloists have evolved in the last twenty years and Venezuelan popular music is very active in its production of *música de fusión*. Some artists who have had a sustained a level of production for over ten years, mostly with hybrid ensembles, are Arcano, Onkora, Saúl Vera y su Ensemble, Caracas Sincrónica, and the guitarist Aquiles Báez. They give different names to define their music, such as Saúl Vera with his '*Música instrumental venezolana de nueva tendencia*' (Venezuelan Instrumental Music of New Tendency), in which he incorporates the *bandola llanera*, a folk relative of the mandolin, into his jazz ensemble. Vera is also active as academic composer completing his *Concierto para Bandola y Orquesta* (Concert for Bandola and Orchestra) in 2000 and writing a method for the instrument. Andrés Eloy Medina, oboist of Arcano, defines it as '*Música nenezolana contemporánea,*' (Venezuelan Contemporary Music) (Mendoza 2000), in which the boundaries in terminology and music-making between contemporary academic music and progressive popular music are diffused. Other names which have been coined in the media are '*música contemporánea de raiz venezolana*' (contemporary music of Venezuelan roots) and '*música folklórica urbana*' (urban folk music). The joining of borders between the three music worlds is one of the most important results of the *fusión* category, as well as the creation and advancement of the new Venezuelan popular music.

Some newcomers should be mentioned because of their surprising high level of music production, despite of having recently appeared: C4 Trío, the new *cuatro* music of Venezuela, Huáscar Barradas, a flutist proclaiming and taking advantage of the validity of neofolklore in its general meaning, Ensemble Catako, Akurima, Pabellón sin Baranda, Kapicúa, Germaín Coronado with Toberías and Ozono Jazz, among many others, with propositions that blend influences from folk music, jazz, rock and academic new music. The latter group has developed an adaptation of the *zoropo*-playing technique '*jalo*' of the *bandola llanera* to the nylon-string guitar, as in the track 'Espirales.'

An initiative called 'VenezuelaDemo,' lead by Alejandro Calzadilla, Luis Laya, Raúl Abdueza and Germán Acero, has achieved in producing since 2005 until 2008, twenty four compact discs which include one track of each artist or group of popular music recorded in Venezuela since the year 2000. This valuable collection, covering over 400 artists of all genres, was financed by the government. Its international distributions has just began, which may mean an opening to the world of the new Venezuelan popular music.

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