

Neofolklore (Venezuela)

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In Venezuela, the term *neofolklore* indicates the use of traditional Venezuelan folk music by popular music artists or groups, in which the instruments and music procedures are different from those used in the original folk music, but in which the main formal, rhythmic, melodic and harmonic elements of the original are maintained or referred to strongly. Its intentions are to promote traditional Venezuelan folk music through professional live or recorded music productions - as well as to market the artist's or group's production, performance and arrangement abilities. Since 2005, however, the definition has shifted with the application of the term by disc jockeys on Venezuelan radio stations to designate a category in recorded popular music in which any type of appearances of folk music elements exists. This is a result of a new law sanctioned by the *Asamblea Nacional* (National Assembly) on December 2004, the *Ley de Responsabilidad Social de la Radio y Televisión* (Law of Social Responsibility of the Radio and Television). The law regulates the amount of hours that radio stations must reserve to transmit music derived from national productions which are defined by having at least 70 percent of Venezuelan staff, performers, investment capital, localities and Venezuelan cultural values (Gobierno, 2006). Therefore, in order to obtain broadcasting space in radio stations without the 'payola,' or at least a fairer treatment, Venezuelan popular music productions of all genres began in 2005 to include folk elements in their music, providing at the same time the music needed by the stations to comply with this category, which was broadly named neofolklore. The term has also been lightly used to designate music that is more experimental and progressive in nature, although still using some aspects

of the traditional folk music. This usage can be better understood within the term *fusión* (see separate entry).

Neofolklore in Venezuela may be distinguished from both *proyección* and *fusión*, keeping in mind that music groups or individual artists may change their production from one category to another as a natural development of their creative progress, or coexist in more than one at the same time. *Proyección* (see below) designates individual popular music artists and groups who aim to present the traditional folk music in a way that is as faithful as possible to the sound produced by the original folk musicians, but through professional live or recorded music productions. *Fusión* denotes new compositions, experimental in nature, that use elements of traditional Venezuelan music.

Characteristics of Neofolklore

In Venezuelan neofolklore the instruments are different from those employed in the original folk music. Nevertheless, a traditional folk instrument such as the *cuatro* or the *maracas* is usually included. Instrumental variations may include changes in performing practices, instrumental combinations, inclusion of symphonic instruments, arrangements for symphonic orchestra, for choir and for rock/jazz band, use of electronics, amplification and digital technology. Compositional procedures not found in the original folk music are used, including larger changes in formal structures in the way of introductions, interludes and endings, but conserving the original form of the folk music pieces in a considerable proportion. Neofolklore also employs tempo changes, extensive part counterpoint, extended harmonization, instrumental virtuosity and improvisation in jazz style, change of rhythm while maintaining the melodic and/or harmonic structure or the other way round, collage and fragmentation of original material, mixing of genres, among many other resources. It achieves a good balance in sounding different, appealing to a larger media audience, and at

the same time still being recognized as belonging to Venezuelan traditional music. Some of the major characteristics of neofolklore are:

- Professional music productions (live and recorded) of traditional folk music
- Adaptation of time scales for media formats
- May include new lyrics and music, in accordance with style
- Independent of fixed calendar/place occurrences of the folk expression
- Single artist or group may perform different folk genres
- Popular music behavior: professional quality in recordings and in performance productions, staged concerts, sound amplification, artist-audience relationship, vinyl/CD making, tours, sales-oriented market-strategy development
- Substitution of the original folk music as reference for identity and values at the national level.

All of the above are shared with the music of the *grupos de proyección*; in other respects, however, neofolklore is different:

- Different instruments and instrumental combinations from the original version, but usually including at least one traditional instrument
- Larger structural and formal changes, but conservation of considerable part of the original form
- Inclusion of different compositional procedures from the original music
- Original function of folk expression changed to entertainment and money-making (as is the case with the *grupos proyección*), but without the pedagogical element that is present in many of the latter.

The first neofolklore practices can be dated to the 300+ transcriptions and arrangements of Venezuelan folk music to choir, piano or guitar by the composer and music-leader Vicente Emilio Sojo, which he began in 1937. Although intended for academic music disciplines because of its time context, the many different recordings of his arrangements have become popular music and influenced the whole development of neofolklore thereafter. One of the first major groups in this category was the Quinteto Contrapunto, a mixed-vocal ensemble from 1962, which set the trend not only for later choir contrapuntal arrangements of folk music, but also for the instrumental ensembles that flourished from the 1980s onwards. The distinct voices of Jesús Sevillano and Morela Muñoz, a soprano with formal training, characterized this famous vocal quintet. They were followed in the 1970s with a similar formula by Serenata Guayanesa, an all-male voice quartet. Two of the main instrumental ensembles were El Cuarteto (1978) and Ensemble Gurrufio (1984), both having the concert flute as their main melodic instrument. 1975 saw the beginning of a large youth orchestral movement in Venezuela, reaching national proportions and international fame. By 2013 the total number of orchestras stood at 285. The prevalence of symphonic instruments in the country from the mid-1970s was a key factor in the development of neofolklore and of *fusión* groups of hybrid instrumental combinations (folk and symphonic instruments), especially with instruments such as the traverse flute, clarinet and oboe, which are absent from the traditional folk music instrumental. The use of symphonic instruments to perform traditional folk arrangements is one of the main lines of expansion in Venezuelan neofolklore, which incorporates a level of musicianship and instrumental virtuosity never heard before; this procedure was pioneered by the Quinteto Contrapunto.

The flute has gained a renowned position as the *flauta venezolana* (Venezuelan flute), through the success of the above-mentioned ensembles, based on a neofolklore repertoire with demanding virtuoso performing techniques. Other instruments are approaching the same

direction, such as the violin in the case of Alexis Cárdenas, and the piano in the *joropo* productions of Claudia Calderón, performing on this instrument exact transcriptions of field recordings of music from *joropo central* and *joropo llanero* harp players. The jazz pianist Prisca Dávila includes some *joropo central* inspirations in her repertoire. The violin already existed in folk music from the Andean region, and the *piano joropo* had indistinctly survived in the ambience of hotel lounges. However, these new artists have introduced classically trained performance virtuosity into a popular music market. A trend present in many contemporary instrumental groups is to develop their neofolklore practices towards experimenting and creation, which would place them in the category of *fusión* music. Afro-Venezuelan groups who devoted themselves to *proyección* music have also started to follow the trend of elaborating their music and thus moving towards neofolklore and *fusión*; an example is Tambor Urbano from 1996 onwards.

Proyección

In *proyección* priority is always given to the employment of the same instruments as in the original version. Performance may involve arrangements and adaptations of the original music to concert-stage presentation or to recorded track-time limits, in the way of introductions, solos, codas and small changes in the formal structure. Composing new lyrics within the traditional harmonic and rhythmic formats, as well as composing new songs maintaining a close relation to the traditional style, are all part of the objective of mass-media promotion of the traditional music. The musicians involved often refer to their activity as a ‘*rescate-type*’ of amateur research, in other words they see themselves as ‘rescuing’ Venezuelan traditional music from oblivion, through their promotional activity. Performances of *música de proyección* can take place in any concert hall, at any time of the year, allowing the consumption of this folk-substitute to be removed from its cultural, time-place

relationship. In a similar practical way, one single artist or group may include in a performance many different folk genres, although it is also common that a *grupo de proyección* specializes in only one folk genre, such as the Afro-Venezuelan music commonly known as *grupos de tambor* (drum groups).

One of the first *grupos de proyección* to make an impact on popular music in Venezuela was the Grupo Madera in 1978. Un Solo Pueblo, founded in 1976, headed a large list of groups that flourished in the mid-1970s and the 1980s, performing Afro-Venezuelan traditional folk music and becoming successful with the nation-wide insertion of the *parranda* music from the Barlovento region at Christmas time. Simón Díaz, a solo *llanero* (plainsman) singer, has been producing music extensively since 1961, and has become an identity figure of Venezuelan culture through his recordings of *tonadas*, *pasajes* (slow *joropo* music from the plains), and by achieving various well known hits in this genre. Many such solo artists work around the representation of folk music as a niche in their popular music careers, especially *joropo* singers, and they fit perfectly in the category of *proyección*.

In *grupos de proyección* there is a marked difference between all-genre and single-genre groups. All-genre *proyección* groups have a more pedagogical orientation in their concerts, with the support of slides, verbal explanations and programs structured by regions or instrumental families. They were led by Convencional (founded in 1974), performing Venezuelan folk music of all kinds, and by the Orquesta de Instrumentos Latinoamericanos (Odila), which started in 1982. This large ensemble concentrated on performing music with the original instruments from the whole of Latin American and the Caribbean, based on the audiovisual information and the collection of instruments at the Instituto Interamericano de Etnomusicología y Folklore (INIDEF) in Caracas. Since 1990, the Vasallos del Sol have remained as one of the most important all-genre *grupos de proyección*. Financed by the Fundación Bigott, they are known for the high professional level of their performances and

recordings. However, the polyphonic vocal arrangements and harmonization in their recordings from 1999 onwards, such as *Tibio calor* (Warm Heat), went beyond the musical procedures of traditional folk music, and with these productions, the group stepped into the category of neofolklore.

The single-genre *grupos de proyección* devote themselves to certain musical regions of Venezuela, or to a specific music type or rhythm, becoming the specialists of the chosen genre. Most single-genre *proyección* groups are found in the Afro-Venezuelan folk tradition, with music from Barlovento, from the central coast states or from the south of the Maracaibo Lake. Another of the Bigott Foundation's group, Yuruari (founded in 2002), had a repertoire consisting only of traditional *calipsos de El Callao*. Caraota, Ñema y Tajá from the Lara state concentrates on the music of the *golpe larense*. Old *merengue* music from Caracas is performed by Los Antaños del Stadium and Cañón Contigo. Neither *zoropo* music, whether *llanero*, central or *oriental*, nor the *calipso* groups from El Callao or other cities in the Bolívar state, can be considered as *proyección* music, although they share some characteristics of popular music behavior. Rather they are actual folk performers in a process of media conversion.

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