

**BAROQUE JAZZ: FROM THE BAROQUE TO THE NEO-BAROQUE IN CARPENTIER'S
*CONCIERTO BARROCO***

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Two motives run through the critical literature surrounding *Concierto barroco* with remarkable consistency. Despite its extraordinary density of thematic material, compact form and ornate, expansive language —the novel falls well short of 100 highly ornamented pages, but is able nevertheless to cover a wide expanse of themes— one critic notes that “la crítica se ha ocupado de estudiar dos elementos en particular: la música y la presencia de América en la obra” (Aguilú de Murphy 161). The latter of these spans the tenuous relationship between history and its cultural representation, the spent cultural hegemony of Europe in the colonized Americas, and the nature of *criollo* identity between the New and Old Worlds. The former, music, is a common theme in Carpentier’s literary enterprise, but calls particular attention to itself in this case. Indeed, from the title onward the text of *Concierto barroco* is shot through with explicit and implicit references to musical culture —performance, composition, prevailing tastes and forms— integral to the evolution of his novelistic venture. To this end, significant portions of his story are recounted with a highly specialized language: that of the European musical Baroque.

A renowned musicologist in his day and author of several books on the genesis and development of music in the colonized Caribbean, Alejo Carpentier is also a careful author of fiction. The specialized musical language that he employs in *Concierto barroco* tends to serve the same function literarily as it does musically: that of typically Baroque ornamentation. While something superficial may be lost on the uninitiated reader, who does not understand the author when he writes, for example, about “las piezas de moda que Doménico empezó a sacar del clav-

icémbalo,¹ adornando los aires conocidos con *mordentes*² y *trinos*³ del mejor efecto” (47, emphasis added), the meaning of the passage nevertheless remains intact. Other terms that he uses —*policromía* (18), the *Dies Irae* (19), the proper names of instruments typical of the Baroque still in use today— still form part of the contemporary critical lexicon. On the other hand, when Carpentier introduces a musical concept that does not fall into one of these two categories —a non-trivial, relatively unknown term that acts as a central metaphor (e.g. *concerto grosso*)— he is careful to explain fully the important features of that concept. When the novel’s protagonists “[desencadenan] el más tremendo *concerto grosso* que pudieron haber escuchado los siglos” (42) in the tour de force fifth chapter of the novel, a reader not previously aware of the characteristics of the *concerto grosso* is still able to capture the overarching contours of the form. According to the evidence available in the text, the *concerto* consists of a supporting orchestra over which a number of soloists —in this particular concerto the number ranges from one to four— improvise melodically, putting on display their “infernally virtuosismo” (43) before returning to the beginning —the *da capo*— and bringing the movement to its final chord all together. The more particular details of this complex form are superfluous to the thematic development that takes place in this scene, and Carpentier is content to omit them. However, Carpentier’s choice of the *concerto grosso* is far from casual: according to the above formal description, the concerto shares nearly all of its salient features, including a circular structure with built-in soloistic opportunities, with jazz. We will return to this similarity later.

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1. harpsichord: “A stringed keyboard instrument in use from the 16th to 18th century [...] similar in shape to the modern grand piano.” This and all subsequent definitions comes from *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*.
 2. mordent: “An ornament, especially a single or multiple alteration of the principle note with its lower auxiliary”.
 3. trill: “An ornament consisting of the more or less rapid alternation of a note with the one next above in the prevailing key or harmony”.

The critical literature this short novel has generated seems to have taken its cue from Carpentier's largely decorative lexicon, and has employed a surprising amount of vague, fundamentally ornamental musical terminology while sidestepping any real analysis of its musical content. References to *Concierto barroco* as "a sort of Baroque concerto" (e.g. Bost 24), or to the symbolic meaning of the Baroque concerto in the novel (e.g. Fama 137) abound, but seem either to lack any common understanding of what these terms refer to in a literary context, or merely to propose plainly false, generic definitions, and are by extension largely empty of critical meaning. A striking exception to these examples is one of the first pieces of critical literature available on *Concierto barroco*: a lecture given by Marina Gálvez Acero only four years after the novel's initial publication. In her presentation, Gálvez Acero undertakes a reading of the novel as a literary incarnation of the Baroque *concerto* genre: that is, the *concerto grosso*, also known, like our novel, as the *Baroque concerto*. The basis for her argument—a glossing of the basic contours of the *concerto grosso*—accords largely with the conclusions that the reader is able to draw from Carpentier's own description, briefly analyzed a moment ago. In Gálvez Acero's words, the Baroque concerto consists of "un diálogo entre determinadas solistas [...] y una masa orquestal que los secunda" (539). This analytical foundation is relatively solid from a musical standpoint, and the dialogic metaphor fertile for the development of a narrative argument. Unfortunately, Gálvez Acero's fundamental assumptions about the Baroque *concerto grosso* quickly begin to fall apart. Suffice it to say, given our time constraints, that what she ends up describing is not a Baroque concerto at all, but the more carefully constructed, Classical sonata form, a form that responds to a quite different episteme. The analysis that follows in Gálvez Acero's foundational lecture, regardless of the quality of its analytical content, is fatally anachronistic, and indeed antithetical to the Baroque musical aesthetic.

If I insist on critiquing Gálvez Acero's argument, it is in part to make an important point about musical form over and against literary narrative. While so-called "programmatic" narrative music surely exists, music is essentially a non-narrative space. The best it can do is suggest or evoke.⁴ Literature, on the other hand, is a profoundly narrative object, and only rarely, if ever, conforms to the same contours demanded of musical objects. Gálvez Acero's very thesis assures the at best questionable character of her analysis. The project she proposes in her lecture—that is, attempting to fit a fundamentally narrative object into a fundamentally non-narrative space—is in reality an impossible task. Everything in the novel will simply not all fit. The question that remains, then, is how to read *Concierto barroco* musically while avoiding the totalizing nature of formal musical analysis. I have already partially answered this question in the introductory analysis of Carpentier's treatment of musical language in the novel. After explicating this treatment in more detail, we will return to the problems suggested by Gálvez Acero's argument in order to arrive at a more profound understanding of the importance of musical form in *Concierto barroco*.

The difficulty in making a narrative conform to a musical form is only enhanced by an author with an academic understanding of music like Alejo Carpentier; what promises to be a strictly superficial analysis on the one hand does not correspond to the deeper, indeed structural role music plays in the novel on the other. While it is extremely problematic to harmonize narrative structure and musical structure, as I suggest, it is far less complicated and potentially more productive to characterize certain narrative practices as similar—that is, analogous rather than homologous—to methods of musical development. Recall that Carpentier's deployment of musical terminology naturally separates itself into two distinct categories: ornamental language and

4. I am here speaking only of purely instrumental music. The addition of words—that is, of *text*—to music complicates the matter, but such considerations are outside the scope of this analysis.

structural language. The former category, ornamental language, bears an analogous relationship to the musical ornamentation typical of the Baroque, and it is in terms of ornamental techniques that the most effective purely musical readings of *Concierto barroco* can be, and have been, developed.⁵ Highly specialized but purely ornamental language is merely one example of Baroque musical technique in the novel. The celebrated opening paragraph is a superior example of the type of motivic development common to the Baroque aesthetic, which sought to derive the maximum amount of material from each melodic motive, a practice referred to as *fortspinnung*: literally “spinning out.”⁶ The motive in question, in this case, is *plata*. It is revealing to consider the opening gesture of the novel in the interest of analyzing how *plata* is continuously put into play and transformed:

De plata los delgados cuchillos, los finos tenedores; de plata los platos donde un árbol de plata labrada en la concavidad de sus platos recogía el jugo de los asados; de plata los platos fruteros, de tres bandejas redondas, coronadas por una granada de plata; de plata los jarros de vino amartillados por los trabajadores de la plata; de plata los platos pescaderos con su pargo de plata hinchado sobre un entrelazamiento de algas [...]. (9)

Much of the literature regarding *Concierto barroco* makes passing reference to this first sentence as an example of Carpentier’s interest in chromaticism (e.g. Muller-Bergh), an important interpretation. But it is also a masterful example of what one might conceive of as narrative *fortspinnung*. The word *plata* is used initially in a utilitarian context to describe forks and knives (*silverware*), but rapidly takes on much larger, even constitutive connotations. In the next phrase, it becomes part of the musically alliterative “*de plata los platos*”, in which *plato* is a clear transformation of *plata*, which in turn has inverted its position in the sentence in a typically Baroque literary gesture. Mere words later, the relationship between silver and nature is reversed as the for-

5. Consider Klaus Muller-Bergh, Ester Gimbernat de González, Hortensia Morell, among others.

6. “[Ger., spinning out]. The process by which melodic material is continuously derived from a brief figure [...] so as to produce a continuous melodic [...]. The term has thus been used to characterize textures typical of music of the Baroque as against those of the Classical period”.

mer is represented in and by the latter —“*un árbol de plata*”— and the fruits of nature collected in silver containers. Silver is symbolically “crowned” with a (silver) pomegranate. Finally, everything is subsumed into the discourse of silver, both metonymy and metaphor for the New World and all that it contains: silver workers craft silver containers for wine; silver fisherman catch silver fish; the novelized world is nothing but silver for another half a page before the motive, now finally spent, is discarded for another (briefly *seda*, later *vino*). Still, even after it is seemingly spent, the motive of *plata* returns briefly on various occasions in this chapter—most significantly at the end, as if to represent a truncated recapitulation—and in nearly all subsequent chapters to conjure up all the connotations carefully constructed in this first paragraph. The entire first chapter and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the novel, is quite thoroughly *spun out* of this fundamental image of silver.

This is not the only example of Baroque musical technique in *Concierto barroco*. The exceedingly long, unbalanced sentences and paragraphs that permeate the novel are further examples of elaborate Baroque musical phrase structure, and of the spinning out and embellishment of motives until they are fully spent. The novel offers many easily identifiable moments of *crescendo* and of cacophony, both aural and racial (“¡Imposible armonía!” (25)). Knowledge and recognition of these techniques can positively inform our reading of the text on the level of appreciation, and even underscore important thematic moments —something a longer version of this paper looks into in detail— but ignorance of them does not impede a correct and satisfying reading. The question we must ask then becomes: *Why* read this narrative like a piece of music at all? *Why Concierto barroco?*

In one’s analytical zeal to make a text conform to *a priori* designs, it is altogether too easy to overlook what the text itself has to offer. It has been well-established in countless read-

ings of *Concierto barroco* that principal among the major themes with which the novel deals is the Amo's discovery of a distinctly American creole identity over and against the colonized European identity he sets out to understand, appropriate and assume. There are three moments in *Concierto barroco* in which musical structures plainly offered in the text underscore or transform this theme. In each case, a traditional European genre comes into conflict with an American concept that must be rejected, assimilated, or otherwise subsumed into its hierarchy. In each instance, America is shown to be vital against moribund Europe, and flexible against Europe's rigidity. The first of these moments is the *concerto grosso* performed in the Ospedale della Pietá; the second is the final rehearsal of Vivaldi's opera *Montezuma*; and the third, Louis Armstrong's concert in Venice.

The performance in the Ospedale della Pietá initially presents the trappings of a traditional *concerto grosso*, a musical competition between three historical *virtuosi*: Antonio Vivaldi, Doménico Scarlatti y Georg Friedrich Händel. Initially, it seems that the latter will win out. “— ‘¡El sajón nos está jodiendo a todos!’ —[grita] Antonio, exasperando el *fortissimo*. —‘A mí ni se me oye’ —[grita] Doménico, arreciando en acordes” (43). At this very moment the Cuban *criollo* servant Filomeno, having collected “una batería de calderos de cobre, de todos tamaños” makes an inspired intervention. He begins to pound on his improvised instruments “con cucharas, espumaderas, batidoras, rollos de amasar, tizonas, palos de plumeros” momentarily transforming the *concerto grosso* into what we immediately recognize as a typical jazz tune, and usurping the Saxon's victory in the process. The European composers are so captivated by his “ocurrencias de ritmos, de síncopas, de acentos encontrados, que, por espacio de treinta y dos compases lo dejaron solo para que improvisara” (43-44) before returning to the interrupted concert and bringing it to a close. Thirty-two measures are, significantly, two full realizations of the

traditional sixteen-bar blues form, widely used in standard jazz compositions today; as here, percussion solos in jazz typically occur immediately before returning to the final restatement of the melody.

In this subversion of Baroque musical form Carpentier develops a number of crucial thematic points. Filomeno's rhythmic intervention is a clear reference to the Afro-Cuban rhythms for which the Caribbean is famous. This intervention, which temporarily supplants the *concerto* with a profoundly American form and captivates the paralyzed composers who stand in metonymically for the dominant European Baroque, demonstrates clearly the latter's inability to either fully resist or to fully assimilate Filomeno's wholly American contribution. Later, the second set of lyrics Filomeno sings—unwittingly inspiring what may be the world's first congo line—evokes Nicolás Guillén's famous rhythmic poem "Sensemayá: canto para matar a una culebra." Filomeno sings:

—*La culebra se murió,
Ca-la-ba-són,
Son-són.* (45)

and Vivaldi cannot help but echo the Cuban's refrain—"Ca-la-ba-són-són-són"—, but also cannot help but ironically translate it into an ecclesiastical language he understands: "Kábala-sum-sum" (45-46). In the words of Debra Castillo, "his inspired misinterpretation of the primitive ritual takes that ritual out of its unknown culture and inserts it into his culture, making of the song a baroque composition while at the same time signaling the end of the concert, the end of the carnival, the return of system" (75). The following day, upon reflecting on the previous night's performance, the Amo comments: "Buena música tuvimos anoche", to which Filomeno's rejoinder, set in the lingo of jazz, is of the utmost significance: "Yo diría más bien que era como un *jam session*" (Carpentier 54).

The next noteworthy musical moment is the final rehearsal of Vivaldi's *Montezuma*, at which the Mexican Amo—transformed first into Montezuma himself and then, significantly, into an *Indiano*—and Filomeno are in attendance. The historical sensibility of the former is offended by the blatant distortion of his cultural history to conform to the necessities of European (in particular, Italian) opera, in which a love story, unity of action, beautiful sounds and ideas and “ilusión poética” (69) ultimately trump historical truth and accuracy. The Mexican's reaction to Vivaldi's creative license —“¡Falso, falso, falso; todo falso!” (68)— is an important moment of crisis in his burgeoning American cultural awareness, and already highly commented in the critical literature.⁷ What is important for us is to determine what precisely he finds so offensive. As his objections are systematically countered by Vivaldi's awareness of European cultural paradigms, it becomes clear that what he is unable to accept is the inflexible nature of European opera, which must radically rewrite Mexican history, excising problematic elements (such as la Malinche) and inserting what is absent, in order to assimilate it into a structure that it is capable of understanding and presenting aesthetically. Vivaldi's later commentary that “En América, todo es fábula” (70) is indicative not only of the presence of the quotidian marvelous (*lo real maravilloso*) for which Carpentier is famous, but, more urgently for *Concierto barroco*, it is the first musical moment indicative of the expired cultural hegemony that Europe once was, but no longer is able to exercise over America and American themes. The Amo's disillusionment (*desengaño*) with a Europe that seemed to promise so much more than what he found culminates in this scene, and explodes. When, pages later, *fábula* is associated with the future —“[Los europeos] no entienden que lo fabuloso está en el futuro. Todo futuro es fabuloso” (77)— Car-

7. Consider Raquel Aguilú de Murphy, David Bost (“The Operatic World of *Concierto barroco*”), and Antonio Fama.

pentier is referring to this meaning: Europe's hegemony is in the past; America's is in the future, as he will later show.

In first example discussed, it became clear that America is capable of transforming Europe and injecting it with a new vitality. The final rehearsal of *Montezuma* stands in stark counterpoint as an unequivocal demonstration that Europe is incapable of performing the reverse operation to mold American themes (or, indeed, novels) to its own stagnant forms, leading Vivaldi to muse comically: "Otra vez trataré de conseguirme un asunto más romano" (71). The final significant musical moment in *Concierto barroco*—the opening moments of Louis Armstrong's concert—is also the most concise, and in many ways the culmination of the first two. It seems to indicate a nascent, but nonetheless remarkable, shift in the direction of the cultural hegemony I am speaking of. The cultural capital of jazz, profoundly American, now imported by Europe, is unquestionable, and prepared flawlessly by Carpentier beginning with Filomeno's impromptu jam session. But Carpentier is not content to merely invert the hegemonic hierarchy he has so effectively destabilized. Rather, although the flow of cultural commodities between Europe and the Americas has unmistakably reversed between the first and final chapters, Carpentier significantly affords Europe a final nod, indicative ultimately of a new syncretism rather than a new hegemony, when he refers to jazz as a "nuevo concierto barroco al que, por inesperado parento, [vienen] a mezclarse [...] las horas dadas por los moros de la torre del Orologio" (85).

Before attempting to read *Concierto barroco* within a European Baroque musical form, one must first consider to what end Carpentier would wish to write such a book in the first place, given the thematic material expounded in the text. Assigning *Concierto barroco* a standard European Baroque form would indeed be antithetical to the hybrid, syncretic, and vehemently pro-American, pro-autochthonous ideology the novel proposes. The fundamentally non-narrative

character of music makes it an unlikely, and at best dubious, candidate for the basis of a structural reading of any novel. The importance of music *within* the works of Carpentier, and in particular within *Concierto barroco*, on the other hand, cannot easily be underestimated. The continual subversion and transformation of European musical forms through contact with American elements allows Carpentier to construct a compelling metaphor for the vitality and remarkable originality of the New World freed from the hegemonic constraints of the Old, able not only to inject new life into stale and inflexible hierarchies, but to contribute fresh growth to stagnant cultural systems no longer adequate to deal with syncretic, transatlantic realities.

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