



Activism, Authority, and Aesthetics: Finding the Popular in Academies of *Música Popular*

Michael S. O'Brien

College of Charleston

obrienms@cofc.edu

Abstract

Música popular in Spanish comprises an overlapping but distinct category from its English language cognate popular music. Latin American scholars and musicians alike recognize the category as fundamentally linked to subaltern or counterhegemonic subjectivities, and *música popular* occupies a complex relationship to hegemonic institutions (the state, educational institutions, and the culture industry) in populist democracies like that of contemporary Argentina. Perhaps nowhere are these tensions between populism and hegemony more apparent than in state-sponsored schools of popular music that began to emerge in the 1980s. Based on an ethnographic study of the oldest and one of the best known of these schools in Latin America, this article explores the conceptual tensions inherent in the notion of a populist and counterhegemonic school of music, and provides evidence of the ways those tensions are expressed and partially resolved through discourse and musical performance in and outside of the classroom.

KEYWORDS: *música popular*, popular music education, Argentina, tango, cultural politics, ethnography of music education

Introduction

On October 4, 2006, I was beginning a period of field research at the Escuela de Música Popular de Avellaneda (EMPA), a state-run popular music school located in the industrial suburb of Avellaneda, just south of the capital city of Buenos

Aires, Argentina. I expected to observe classes that afternoon, beginning what would be a year of ethnographic participant-observation in the school. As soon as I climbed the staircase to the second-floor lobby, however, I learned that the day's plans had changed. Banners hung in the hall announcing that the afternoon's classes were cancelled in order to facilitate a protest march through the downtown. Students and teachers milled about the entryway, distributing stacks of flyers to pass out along the march and gathering drums, flutes, trumpets, and other instruments. Eventually, we all filed down the stairs and out into the middle of Avenida Belgrano, a main thoroughfare. Several students unfurled a large banner reading "BUDGET FOR OUR EDUCATION", while others held smaller signs with slogans like "A building of our own now!" and "Public education for all!". We marched for the next hour or so, blocking traffic and playing music all the while.

Musically, the soundtrack for the day's march was a loud and festive pastiche of the mostly Latin American folk and popular. A group of students playing *tamboriles* – large, Afro-Uruguayan barrel-shaped drums associated with parading *candombe* groups – led the way, while jazz trumpeters improvised over their *candombe* rhythms. Later, several flute and charango players layered the well-known *carnavalito* (an Andean folk style) "El humahuaqueño" on top of the same rhythmic base.

As we marched by, we paused briefly in front of the dilapidated former preschool that had been the EMPA's original home twenty years earlier. The EMPA's current location wasn't much better. The current school consisted of a cramped set of classrooms in an aging building situated above a private gym, where students and teachers fought to be heard above the din of recorded music coming from below, and which provincial government officials would close in several months for failing to meet safety codes. The march, and the public concert that had been planned to follow, were cut short by an incoming rainstorm, so we all retreated to the school, crowding into the largest classroom to hold an hours-long assembly in which students and faculty debated their future course of political action.

Musically speaking, this kind of genre-colliding, loud and spontaneous protest bore little resemblance to the ways that any of these genres might have been studied and performed in a classroom setting. In a few months, in end-of-year recitals these students would demonstrate that they were capable of performances that were far more virtuosic, complex, and polished than the music they made on this protest march. Nonetheless, this event – a political, grassroots musical protest that took place partly inside and partly outside the official institutional structure of the school and its curriculum – was perhaps a better demonstration of what students truly learned at EMPA. The school ostensibly existed to encourage and support the production of Argentine *música popular* (I describe the important differences between the English and Spanish senses of the term below). Frequently during my time there, however, the only music that EMPA members made was a means, rather than an end, a form of sonic discourse deployed to draw attention to the state's failure to act as steward of the education of its own citizens.

The raucous collage of musical styles and instruments that the students created in the streets that afternoon was not intended as a public performance of music for entertainment or as art; the conditions precluded any such luxury. Instead, this music served as a sonic invocation of the popular, deployed toward a political

end. This community had formed around and through particular styles of music and shared ideas about that music. On the day of the protest those same styles of music, deployed simultaneously, chaotically, and disruptively in the public sphere carried complicated and multiple meanings. On one hand, they served to celebrate and vindicate the complexity and flexibility of the musical styles themselves, the capacity of the student musicians playing them, and in turn the success of the school as an educational project. On the other hand, these sounds and people were also deliberately, provocatively wrong; they were out of place, symbolically forced into the street by the inadequacies of the space, equipment and funding in their state-sanctioned institutional home. In a cycle of contradictions and irony, in a state-run school of *música popular*, the ministry of education had provided students with a powerful set of symbolic and discursive resources that they would frequently use in critique of the state educational system itself. While *música popular* remained (and remains) closely linked to subaltern and counterhegemonic subject positions, EMPA students and teachers invoked that position in order to argue for a greater, not lesser, degree of government intervention in their education.

In this article, I use the ethnographic case study of the Escuela de Música Popular de Avellaneda to explore some of the tensions inherent in the project of formal education in *música popular*. The EMPA seeks to be, to some extent, a counter-hegemonic institution. It celebrates subaltern forms of musical knowledge and provides students with the tools to engage in populist sound politics. Yet its status as counter-hegemonic is complicated by the ways that it remains within hegemonic systems; it is a state-run institution, structurally based on the European conservatory model and beholden to the political system in which it operates. Finally, EMPA students and faculty are also interested in benefiting from the accruing cultural capital of working within that system, however much they critique its substantial shortcomings.

Música popular and popular music

“What about the *música popular* where you’re from? It’s all jazz, no?”

This question, directed at me (a native of the United States) by a student in a different Argentine music school during my field work, points to my motivation for using the Spanish term *música popular*, rather than its obvious English cognate, throughout this article. Simply put, the terms are not neatly synonymous. Laura Jordán Gonzalez and Douglas Smith (2012) have examined at length the variety of nuances and emphases that the term *música popular* carries in Spanish-language scholarship. Scholars such as Juan Pablo González have emphasized the criterion of mass-mediation and the role of the culture industry in defining the field of study in a way that is closely analogous to the way the term is applied in Anglophone scholarship (González 2001). On the other hand, the term *popular* also has a strong association with subaltern class-based identities. The *Diccionario de la lengua española* offers “*propio de las clases sociales menos favorecidas*” (“belonging to the underprivileged social classes”) as a third definition (Real Academia Española 2001: 1224). Historically, in Spanish-language musicological research this has sometimes meant that studies of *música popular* address folk and

other vernacular musics while completely disregarding mass-mediated music. In Argentina the works of Carlos Vega (1944, 1941) generally followed this pattern and were tremendously influential on several generations of scholars. The conceptual blurriness and inconsistency between the analytic categories of “folk” and “popular” is one common to much of Latin America, and, as Sydney Hutchinson observes, is specifically local. In the case of the rural Dominican Republic, Hutchinson argues for “a rehabilitation of the concept of *típico*” as a category that local scholars and musicians alike use to transcend this binary and conceptualize “transnational ‘roots’ musics that do not easily fit into our usual categories” (Hutchinson 2011: 246).

I concur with Hutchinson that for the ethnographer of music cultures, deploying and deconstructing emic (local, insider’s) categories can be analytically more productive than attempting to reify and apply analytic categories taken from the Anglophone academic discourse in ways that may belie important but subtle distinctions. In this case, however, such an attempt is complicated by the fact that *música popular* is both a concept deployed in global academic discourse (with a variety of meanings, as described above) and an important emic category with a more narrow set of meanings. I am concerned here primarily with the latter issue, of how students and teachers at EMPA and similar programs discursively construct the category of *música popular*, and the ramifications of this construction on their musical and sociopolitical identities.

The EMPA offers training in three musical genres: tango, jazz, and *folklore*, a genre of contemporary mass-mediated music based on older, rural forms and rhythms. The constitution of *folklore* as a contemporary genre of popular music is itself entangled in the intellectual history of *folklore* studies and ethnomusicology in Argentina. Oscar Chamosa (2010) examines this history, and its relationship to broader projects of cultural nationalism, at length. Students pursuing a degree at the school study all three genres in their first year, and then choose to specialize in one for their following three years. While all of these genres have been shaped by the culture industry, and each has enjoyed some period of mass popularity in Argentina, none of them could be currently called popular in the sense of having a mass audience and broad economic support. Rather, *música popular* in the school curriculum excludes those genres of music that are most popular in Argentina in terms of contemporary audience appeal (rock, pop, cumbia, and *reggaetón*, for example). When I asked Ariel Goldemberg, the head of the jazz program at EMPA, about this exclusion, he told me that he approved of this exclusion, because they would “bring down the level” of the school (Goldemberg, personal communication). This was not a universally held opinion among the faculty; another jazz teacher told me that he “wish[ed] we could just open a rock program, so the kids who want to play rock could do that” rather than remain frustrated in his jazz ensemble.

In any case, many of the students and faculty at EMPA explained that they understood *música popular* as a category distinct not only from *música culta* (“learned” or “art” music) but also from *música comercial* – music made to sell. When the student quoted above expressed the notion that the only *música popular* in the U.S. is jazz, she was not suggesting that she was unaware of the existence of American rock or pop, which are pervasive in the Argentine public

sphere. Instead, she was demonstrating what was implicitly obvious to her: that *música popular* does not include such expressions.

Distinguishing *música popular* from *música comercial* is a conceptually slippery business, and genre is only a partial and inadequate tool to do so. Many EMPA students, unlike my student interlocutor above, readily placed (some) rock music, and (some) cumbia, for example, into the former category, and the walls of the school were routinely papered with flyers advertising students' gigs or bands looking for musicians in styles including blues, reggae, funk, rock, and metal. Tango, too, is a contested category whose identity as *música popular* has at times been called into doubt by its success as a commodity in world music and tourist markets. Recently, groups with ties to EMPA such as the tango ensemble Astillero and an umbrella organization that has adopted the slogan "*El tango será popular o no será nada*" ("The tango will be popular or it will be nothing at all") have articulated their musical projects as aesthetically and politically aimed at reclaiming a popular identity for tango locally (Luker 2014). Rodolfo Mederos, a *bandoneón* teacher and founder of the tango curriculum at EMPA, had perhaps the harshest judgment for aspiring tango musicians whose goals were primarily commercial:

[Those] musicians who play in order to eat, or for applause... and therefore it doesn't matter to them what they do, and if they have to play faster, they play faster, if they have to imitate a style, they imitate a style... and it doesn't matter to them because what's important is eating, or getting applause, they're outside of my analysis. I don't see them as musicians, I see them as opportunists. People that play an instrument and have just shown up there. True musicians, those who make their own music, while it may be a way to make a living, and it may be a way to get applause, those who make music because it's a spiritual and ideological necessity, they have to defend or represent their culture – those are who I mean. (Mederos, personal communication)

Commercial success itself is not necessarily reason enough for a musical genre or its musicians to lose their *popular* bona fides. Many of the musicians whose work EMPA students study (especially in the tango program) enjoyed some degree of commercial success in their day, and most EMPA students and teachers earn, or hope to earn, a living from their own music and would happily reap large economic rewards from doing so if they could. But these musicians' insistence upon differentiating music that is made to sell (*comercial*) and music that is made for, in Alabarces' terms "a dimension of the subaltern within the symbolic economy" points to their understanding of *música popular*, in the local sense, as counter-hegemonic (Alabarces 2008: n.p.).¹ Maintaining and valuing that counter-hegemonic dimension of subalternity within a state-run, conservatory-style music school, of course, is not without its challenges.

History of *música popular* in music schools

The state-run conservatory system in Argentina is nearly a century old, and popular and folk musics were not an official part of its curriculum until quite

recently. The National Conservatory was founded in 1924, and has long had a performance program in *bandoneón*, the concertina relative that is strongly associated with tango music (García Cánepa n.d.). According to Ricardo Fiorio, a *bandoneón* teacher who joined the faculty in 2004, up until his arrival the *bandoneón* curriculum there had consisted entirely of Western art music (Fiorio, personal communication). He quickly worked to incorporate tango repertoire and technique into the program of study. It was not just the curriculum that excluded popular and folk styles, but also the institutional culture. Lilián Saba, currently a piano professor in the *folklore* program at EMPA, studied at the National Conservatory in the mid-1970s, while also working as an accompanist for a folkloric dance company. She recalled that, while practicing some of this folk repertoire in an empty conservatory classroom, “one of the administrative staff, one of the more savvy ones, came to shut the door for me and tell me ‘it’s not in your best interest if they [the faculty] hear you playing that” (Saba, personal communication).

When the EMPA opened in 1986, it became the first state institution in Latin America to award performance degrees specifically in popular music styles. The school began as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, a traditional conservatory education, accepting only students who had already completed the *Ciclo Básico*, or introductory sequence (typically three years long) at another conservatory, or could demonstrate the equivalent training by audition. By the late 1980s, however, authorities in the school saw two difficulties with this program. First, they were overwhelmed with requests from interested students who did not have the requisite classical training, but they were not able to fill their quotas of eligible students. In order to maintain a student population large enough to justify keeping the school open, they decided to develop a *Ciclo Básico* of their own. Second, many of the teachers began to suspect that although classical training provided an adequate basis for acquiring technical proficiency on the instrument, students might be better served by a beginner’s curriculum that introduced them to the specific demands of popular music from an earlier stage, including not only technical fluency and musical literacy but the ability to improvise, arrange and compose. The school’s own *Ciclo Básico* opened in 1991, although it still required an entrance examination to demonstrate a level of technical proficiency on the student’s primary instrument roughly equivalent to one year’s formal study.

Opening up a *Ciclo Básico* did not resolve the school’s enrollment problems, however. Rather, it replaced one problem with another. By the mid 1990s, interest in the school had far exceeded the capacity for the spaces offered to new entrants. Students in the senior years of the program who entered in the late 1990s recalled long lines that formed outside the school days before enrollment began, and camping out in the street for up to three days at a time in order to reserve a place in classes for the year. Unsurprisingly, the students became quite dissatisfied with this ordeal, and called for an end to enrollment caps. The school ultimately removed the enrollment cap, as well as the audition for entrance, in 2003. Students entering the school since that date are required to take a placement exam (including both playing and written components) but there is no minimum level for entrance. It is now common for students in the *Ciclo Básico* to begin the program with no formal musical training whatsoever. Teachers who had been

teaching in the program since before this change was implemented reported that they have had to lower their expectations of how much material students will be able to learn in a given year, since students enter the program with less of a base of musical knowledge and technical capability on their instruments.

While EMPA's own institutional structure and curricula underwent substantial changes in the first twenty years of the school's existence, it also served as a model for a growing number of similar institutions throughout Argentina and Latin America. By the time of my field research in 2007, there were six state-run conservatories with similar programs operating in the capital city and surrounding province of Buenos Aires. In 2007, the National University in Villa María, Argentina, hosted the first Latin American Congress on Academic Training in Popular Music, which attracted 330 participants from six Latin American countries. The Congress has only grown since then. Its fourth iteration, held in 2013, featured performances by high-profile *música popular* performers including Brazilian multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal and Venezuelan singer Cecilia Todd.

The growing popularity of the popular music conservatory model does not, however, guarantee its success or stability. Even its advocates recognize that the very notion of institutionalizing and standardizing popular art forms is fraught with contradictions and potential downfalls. One of the organizers of the first Congress in Villa María claimed that its central purpose was to "posit the great dilemma [of] how to train university [students] in *música popular* without ruining it".² The idea that formalized instruction in *música popular* might be enough to ruin (*desvirtuar*) it suggests a fundamental anxiety about the very feasibility of enshrining the popular in academic institutions, an anxiety that was common among the teachers at the EMPA and peer institutions.

Finding the popular in schools of *música popular*

In claiming that *música popular* as it is practiced at EMPA remains closely linked to subaltern and counterhegemonic subject positions, I do not mean to suggest that these terms are necessarily equivalent. Gareth Williams' warnings about the pitfalls of uncritically conflating "the popular" and counterhegemonic positions are particularly useful here. As Williams (2002: 6) observes, the twentieth century in Latin America witnessed the emergence of a wide array of populist state regimes of power, regimes whose claims to represent "the people" constituted a hegemony, and one that frequently "consolidate[d] itself through specific relations to its negative outsides", that is, by excluding its own citizens (frequently the non Spanish speaking, indigenous, and/or rural populations). To be sure, the field of contemporary *música popular* in general, and the state-run music school in particular, are imbricated within several overlapping hegemonic forms of power and authority, including the political, economic, and symbolic.

Specifically, teachers and students at the EMPA and similar schools must contend with their own relationship to the state educational system, the Eurocentric and postcolonial conservatory system, and the commercial music industry. Clearly, on one level many of these individuals seek a position of greater power within these fields.³ They seek the stability of a position as an employee of

a state institution, or the credential of an official degree from one, and most seek to earn a living from music. Nonetheless, they remain committed to the idea of “the popular” as a subaltern position from which they can offer a critique of those very institutions from which they seek to benefit. When EMPA students march, disrupting traffic with *candombe* drums and *carnavalitos*, in order to demand not less, but more (but also different) state intervention in their musical education, they are occupying a subaltern subject position, which, in Williams’ terms, is a “site in both the social field and in the philosophical/epistemological realms at which the displacement from hegemonic to nonhegemonic sign systems may occur” (Williams 2002: 10). At the EMPA that position, and those sign systems, are articulated musically as well as discursively.

While acknowledging the implicit contradictions and potential pitfalls in the project of a counter-hegemonic, populist conservatory, I believe that in practice, the EMPA often acts in that role, as does the community and culture that it engenders. I understand the EMPA not just as an *escuela de música popular* (a “popular music school”) but an *escuela popular de música* (a “popular/populist school of music”), one that produces and advocates for subaltern subject positions in the symbolic economy. In the following sections, I will explore the dimensions of this subalternity, which I believe is dependent upon three factors.

Firstly, as an institution governed by the clientelist, weak-state hegemony of Argentine provincial politics, the EMPA operates within a dysfunctional system of political authority that is governed by personal connections rather than ideology. EMPA teachers and students whom I interviewed felt that their institution has been historically neglected or even deliberately attacked by this system. Secondly, as a result, the educational experience at EMPA has always been characterized by frequent protests and other forms of activism. Students learn that *música popular* and political activism are inextricable from one another. Thirdly, while EMPA community members are often embattled with the system of political authority, they also operate within a system of cultural authority that celebrates subaltern forms of musical knowledge. In the classroom teachers de-center their own pedagogical authority, and privilege orality/aurality and individual creativity over the scriptural authority of the score or the composer’s intent.

Structures of authority

Under a Gramscian model of state hegemony, schools serve as one of the primary institutions that constructs and reinforces a system of domination by consent by educating citizens through an ideology that conflates the interest of the dominant class with their own (Gramsci 2007). The notion of a stable and ideologically coherent state hegemony is one that is far removed from the realities of political and economic power in post-dictatorial Argentina. Instead, the nation operates as a federalist system with substantial control at the provincial level, particularly regarding educational policy. Furthermore, as political historians Levitsky and Murillo (2005: 3) have observed, Argentina has been “plagued with widespread institutional weakness”. That is, regimes of power have passed from one to another in an unpredictable and often undemocratic fashion, and there has often been a wide disparity between laws as written and laws as enforced. The result is

a system of political rule under which elected officials enjoy a great degree of autonomy during their term, but have little ability to enact lasting change that is not simply reversible by their successors. The Argentine political system has been characterized as clientelist (Auyero 2005) and having low levels of what Guillermo O'Donnell (2007) has called "horizontal accountability". The state in Argentina remains a system in which political alliances are formed not out of shared ideology but rather pragmatic self-interested decisions about who is likely to provide greatest access to resources and power, and where non-majority interest groups have little access to participation in democratic processes.

For the EMPA, operating within this clientelist system has had several ramifications. First, some of the neglect that the school has suffered may be due to the political circumstances of its founding. Its founder, José Gabriel Dumón, then director of education for the province of Buenos Aires was a lifelong member of the Unión Cívica Radical (or Radicales), the center-right party that briefly controlled the province during the post-dictatorial period beginning in 1983. The year following the EMPA's founding, the Radicales were defeated by the center-left Justicialist (or Peronist) party, which has held power ever since (Casa de la Provincia de Buenos Aires n.d.). It is possible that the school's association with the rival party at its genesis may account at least partially for the neglect it has been shown by provincial officials in the ministry of education in the subsequent years. Several teachers I spoke to voiced this theory, and while I found no definitive evidence for it, a parallel and contemporary case does suggest it is plausible. Murillo (1999: 46) reported similar forms of systematic favoritism and neglect in the relationship among teachers' unions and the national and provincial governments during the same time period based on the degree to which these unions allied themselves with the political party in power or its rival.

In any case, by the time of my field research (2006–2007), administrative neglect and political conflict had become normalized at the school. During the first semester of the 2007 school year (March–July), classes were cancelled, as the provincial authorities responsible for monitoring the safety of the EMPA building had condemned it for insufficient fire exits and other infrastructural defects. Meanwhile, those same authorities were unable to provide a suitable alternative space in which to hold classes. The students have frequently engaged in populist forms of activism within and outside of the school in demand of better facilities; these have included a long-term *toma* ("take", or occupation) of the original school building in 2001, and frequent marches and traffic blockades (*piquetes*) like the one described in the introduction.

My period of field research was an especially embattled one for the school. The entrance had been painted by students with a caricature of a screaming man and the caption "*Escuela en Lucha*" ("school in conflict"). When I first arrived, I met independently with Javier Cohen, the director of the tango area. Cohen, whom I knew from my brief studies at the school a few years earlier, tried to prepare me for the situation. "I think it's great that you're here to analyze all of this," he said, "but it'll be complicated. It's like, if you're crazy, you go to a psychologist. But right now, I don't know, maybe we're too crazy to be psychoanalyzed" (Cohen, personal communication)! This conflict was seen most dramatically in terms of the relationship between the director (a position appointed by the provincial authorities) and the faculty and students. Because the director position was one

that was appointed by provincial authorities outside of the school, and this particular director had been hired from outside of the school's faculty and had no prior background in *música popular*, many faculty and students felt that this particular director neither understood nor was sufficiently qualified to serve in a leadership capacity there. In fact, several months prior to my research the faculty unanimously signed a petition to the provincial authorities calling for the director's resignation. Several weeks before my fieldwork started, this conflict culminated in an *escrache* – a public denouncement of the director by students who surrounded her office, chanting insults and banging on the door. The director called the police, who cited several students. Lingering and open resentment of the director was pervasive; posters hung in the hallway calling her a “liar, traitor, [and] coward” for several weeks. By the end of my field research, the director had taken a long-term medical leave from the school and has since left it permanently.

These events were exceptional for the school in the degree of their antagonism, but the pairing of political action and study at EMPA were not. Students and teachers alike pointed to the galvanizing form of political discourse and action in the EMPA as a constitutive part of what it means to study or make a living from *música popular*. Ezequiel Yusyp, member of the politically engaged rock-folklore band Arbolito, characterized his own participation in protests at the EMPA during his time there as “formative,” explaining that “when 150 people get together on a little patio in order to think about what to do, or cut off streets and all play music together in order to protest, it toughens you up in a lot of ways” (Paz 2009). Similarly, Ariana Aldariz and Matías Jalíl, two musicians who had recently graduated from EMPA when I interviewed them in 2007, were able to recognize that the hours they had spent in protest, occupying the school library and causing the school to cancel classes, had been themselves a form of education in *música popular*:

AA: At the time of the first occupation [of the school], while we were harmed by it, it was still a very enriching experience that we had. Because there was unity, first, it was a kind of growth...

MJ: We stayed there to sleep...

AA: [We learned] to understand the student government, how it worked, the community of professors, all that we had to fight for. Despite all the lost class hours, I think it was super enriching.

(Aldariz and Jalíl, personal communication)

EMPA professor Ricardo Cantore characterized this political consciousness, and training in political activism, as an essential part of a *popular* musician's professional training:

I tell the kids, besides working at playing an instrument, practicing, you need to have a rifle on the table. Symbolically, I mean. If you don't know how to defend this, it's no good! Don't think that because you're a great student, because you know how to play a lot, that in this country they're going to recognize you. That doesn't exist; it's a lie! (Cantore, personal communication)

Meanwhile, despite their attitude of entrenched opposition to the administration and political authorities, the students and faculty enjoyed relatively harmonious relationships among themselves. Many students effusively praised their professors as inspiring musicians and teachers, and most could identify one or more of these teachers who had acted as mentors in ways that extended beyond their formal relationship in the classroom. Most of the teachers were held in high regard both by the students and in the wider popular music culture. Furthermore, there was very little correspondence between the respect that teachers were afforded by their colleagues and by their students, and the formal position that they occupied within the school. Many of the most accomplished popular musicians who taught at EMPA did not hold degrees themselves, and as a result held positions that were formally classified as *difícil cobertura* (difficult to cover), a classification similar to an adjunct faculty position in the U.S. university system, with no guarantee of permanence from year to year. At the school's founding, nearly all of the faculty held these designations because degrees that would have nominally qualified them for the positions they held – specifically, conservatory degrees in popular music performance or composition – did not exist in Argentina at that time. Today, an increasing number of the younger faculty are now the EMPA's own alumni. Ironically, I found that students often afforded these younger, credentialed teachers less respect than their older colleagues, precisely because they came by their training in this formal academic capacity rather than in the informal, real-world experience of working as a professional musician.

This kind of contradiction is typical of a school in which formal educational processes and informal music cultures intersect. In order to account analytically for these disparities and contradictions, I suggest that the EMPA and similar popular music schools can be understood as operating under two separate systems of authority, which I have termed *political authority* and *cultural authority*. By political authority I mean the system of budgetary apportionments, faculty appointments, titles, and degrees by which the state operates and controls the school as a formal institution. By cultural authority I mean the unofficial, socially and discursively constructed system of respect that community members establish by demonstrating cultural competence through performance. These systems occasionally come into conflict (as in the case of the students' and faculty's resentment of their director, which stemmed partially from her lack of experience with *música popular*), and that conflict itself is partially constitutive of the subaltern identity of the popular in a formal institutional setting. I do not think that these dual systems of authority are unique to popular music schools. In many ways they map onto conflicts between faculty and administration that would be familiar to members of many educational institutions, musical and otherwise. I do think, however, that the ways in which cultural authority is deployed in the EMPA classroom are both aesthetically and politically different from the ways they typically operate in conservatory cultures, and that these differences mark an important means of producing and reproducing subaltern knowledge within a hegemonic institution.

Authority and subaltern knowledges

As an institution devoted to the reproduction of European cultural forms and European epistemologies, the Western conservatory in postcolonial nations has often been involved in the production of what Walter Dignolo (2012) and Aníbal Quijano (2000) have called “colonial difference” and the “coloniality of power”. Across Latin America, conservatory curricula that privileged not only European repertoire, but European-derived ways of determining and delimiting what does and does not constitute music, musicianship, and musical knowledge have been deployed as ways of maintaining this colonial difference, marginalizing subaltern groups and delegitimizing their forms of knowledge (Santamaría Delgado 2007). Schools of *música popular* like the EMPA are based on the Western conservatory model to varying degrees. Specifically, because the EMPA is classified as a conservatory by the Province of Buenos Aires, its curriculum must be structurally identical to those of the province’s Western conservatories. That is, EMPA students must take courses of the same number of credit hours, and with identical titles, to those taken by their peers in classical conservatories. In practice, this means that they study music theory, music history, and so on, only devoted to the genres of their own specialization. I discuss these curricula in greater depth elsewhere (O’Brien 2010). Despite these limitations and this colonial legacy, I found that through different pedagogical approaches, EMPA teachers did foster the production of “subaltern knowledges” (Dignolo 2012) that challenged the coloniality of power. Specifically, I found that the curriculum, and teachers’ discourse and practice in the classroom, encouraged such production in several ways; they privileged aural/oral learning, de-centered the authority of the score and the composer, and encouraged creative divergence from idiomatic practices rather than mimesis.

In his seminal ethnography of a classical conservatory on the East Coast of the U.S., Henry Kingsbury described a masterclass in which a respected piano professor was teaching a young student. When the professor instructed the student to play a series of notes longer, the student objected, explaining that the notes were marked *staccato* in the score. The professor’s rejoinder also appealed to the authority of the score; he explained that the student’s edition of the score was inferior to the original, in which the articulation was marked as longer. While aesthetic decisions were certainly grounded in the unequal power relationships in the room, according to Kingsbury (1988: 87-88), in nearly all cases in the conservatory, arguments about aesthetics could be strengthened by appealing to the communally shared “devout respect for the creativity of the composer” as manifest in the score.

It is difficult to imagine such an exchange ever taking place at the EMPA. While I did regularly see teachers correct students’ performances, the authority by which aesthetic decisions were made was far more contingent and subjective. By effectively de-centering the authority to make aesthetic decisions, EMPA teachers opened a space for the production of subaltern musical knowledges, a process through which musical aesthetics and politics are intricately linked. Two interactions that I observed illustrate the ways that de-centered cultural authority and subaltern musical knowledges were produced and reproduced in the classroom.

In October 2006, a multi-level group class of charango students at EMPA were preparing for their end-of-year playing examinations. According to the curriculum, the students were responsible for a set of solo arrangements of traditional *huaynos*, *chacareras*, and other pieces, as well as scales and technical exercises. Toro, the charango teacher, requested the pieces one by one, and appeared somewhat surprised when the students struggled to perform them adequately. Several students had memory problems and could not even make their way through a tune without stopping. "You haven't played these in a while", Toro guessed, and the students acknowledged that he was right. As I had observed the class for the previous several weeks, I was also somewhat surprised by this sudden show of difficulty and apparent lack of preparedness.

The previous classes had been far more student-directed. The week before, a first-year student had played a *huayno* standard, "Ojos azules," in F-sharp minor, which she had taught herself by ear. The tune was fully written out in another key in the course materials, but Toro was pleased that she had discovered workable harmonies herself. Since the key in which she had learned the piece fitted her voice better, he told her she did not need to learn the required version for her exam. Instead, while she performed, he instructed the advanced students to improvise an accompaniment in the new key. Another student's lessons had been devoted almost entirely to several of his own compositions. Toro had been enthusiastic about these students' initiatives and had not mentioned the official curriculum during the past several weeks. When these students then showed difficulty with the required curriculum (I later learned that they had mastered it all effectively several months before and had effectively moved on), he was not upset, but rather said simply: "you'll need to look at those again. I'll be back in a few minutes," and left the room. I then watched the students try as a group to reconstruct from memory one of the required pieces. Several of them had a clearer idea than the others, or would try part of a melodic phrase hoping that muscle or aural memory would bring the rest of it to mind. Their progress was slow, and after about ten minutes or so of group effort they had mostly pieced together a single *chacarera*. I spoke to one of the students after class in the hall, asking whether they didn't have a written version of the piece on which to rely. "Sure, it's in our course book," he replied. Actually, several of the students in the class had brought their books to the lesson, but evidently they found it more expedient to rely on collective aural and muscle memory than to consult the written transcription when they encountered difficulty.

During the same month I observed a third-year tango ensemble class, where instructor Fernando was leading a group consisting of piano, three guitars, and electric bass, and playing cello in the ensemble himself. While some ensemble instructors created fully written-out arrangements tailored to the group (and students were expected to be able to read and perform these effectively), Fernando had decided that this ensemble was advanced enough to try *a la parrilla* playing, creating an unwritten group arrangement by ear, drawing from a vocabulary of standard accompaniment figures and idiomatic forms of melodic phrasing. After listening a few times to a recording of a *milonga*, the group ran through the piece, fumbling to find the melody and correct chords. As a group, they discussed who would play the melody in which section, and their teacher only interjected from time to time when he found the students' musical ideas

unworkable, suggesting a substitute harmonic progression in one place, and asking the pianist to switch octaves to create a clearer ensemble texture in another. Over the course of several weeks, I watched the group transform this piece and several others, opting in many cases to subvert genre conventions. In the classic tango song “El último café” for example, they eventually developed an arrangement where the electric bass played the principal melodic role, and the rest of the group created a repeating two-bar vamp in bolero rhythm to introduce the piece. There was a ludic quality to this genre-bending, which served as an in-joke among tango musicians who were well familiar with, and thus given permission to subvert, aesthetic conventions. After the end-of-semester concert where the ensemble performed this piece, the tango department director complemented Fernando on his leadership. “Hey, that ‘Trío Los Panchos’⁴ intro you put on ‘El último café,’ that was great,” he said with a chuckle.

Both of these teachers de-centered their own authority as arbiters of musical decisions in the classroom. Toro chose to adapt the requirements for performance examinations (requirements that he had developed himself) for a charango student who had taken the initiative to learn the material differently, and he spent a significant portion of instrument lessons not on the set repertoire, but on students’ independent compositions. Fernando encouraged students to make their own decisions as arrangers, even (and especially) when those decisions led students in a direction that subverted the conventions of the genre that they were studying. In short, they were teaching students not to replicate their own musical aesthetics, but rather to think for themselves.

Música popular in the academy also involves a de-centering of the authority of the score and the composer in a way that stands in stark contrast to Western conservatory approaches. Partially, this is a necessity; the assumption that one might be able to treat a score as a complete record of all the necessary information in order to produce a satisfactory performance of a piece is simply not relevant to *música popular*, where students and professionals alike depend on a wide array of notational schema as prescriptive instructions to fellow musicians and mnemonic devices for themselves. Complete scores in these genres are highly unusual. Typically tango and *folklore* compositions, when they are published at all, are available only as a simplified piano reduction or, in more recent years, a transcription of the principal vocal melody and chord symbols in publications similar to a jazz fake book. In the classroom, too, students demonstrated that they had been trained to trust their ear and their intuition over a score, even when that process was less expedient. Neither the charango students struggling to remember their solo repertoire, nor the tango ensemble struggling to learn their milonga by ear, were ever encouraged to consult written sources, although they were readily available in both cases.

To a certain extent, canonical recordings of these pieces supplement the score in providing direction to musicians looking to learn an existing piece. But even in these cases, that authority is undermined, for students of *música popular* are taught not to replicate an existing recording but rather to use it as a guide in creating their own original version. Thus the strict division between composer and performer is always at least somewhat blurred; performing *música popular* by necessity involves imposing one’s own compositional intentions as an arranger (written or otherwise) of the source material. At the EMPA (and many similar

programs) this design was reflected in the curriculum, where students in music theory classes and instrumental ensembles were required to create their own arrangements and compositions, and were encouraged to innovate rather than replicate existing styles. This encouragement was not limitless, of course, and was contingent upon performing some degree of competence within the system of cultural authority. I saw teachers give students far more leeway to make these decisions in the upper-level classes than they did in beginning classes. Thus, teachers made clear that an education in *música popular* prepared students not to replicate their teachers' own musical subjectivities, but ultimately to learn to subvert them.

Conclusions

At first it was hard for me to square the entrenched sense of embattlement and adversarial protest that characterized the EMPA during much of my fieldwork with the warmly collegial classroom relationships among students and teachers. I ultimately came to understand, though, that to a certain extent the students' and faculty's shared sense of persecution and subaltern status contributed to their sense of a shared mission of making music that was truly popular in both aesthetic and political terms. In part, this shared mission was made possible by the dysfunctional system of political authority and the more flexible system of cultural authority. In fact, making music together within the school, particularly during the period in which the school was closed due to safety concerns, itself became a daily act of subversion for many of these teachers and students. Although classes were officially suspended, both students and teachers met daily. The faculty and students collectively decided in a general assembly that rather than call their actions a strike or occupation, they would characterize the school as "in a permanent assembly". This underlined the constructive and collective nature of their actions, which were frequently both politically and musically oriented. Many teachers offered workshops on instrumental technique, music theory, and other topics that would normally have formed part of the students' standard curriculum in order to keep students engaged with the school and occupying the school building in defiance of the provincial authorities. The very act of teaching what was, in effect, official school curriculum, within the school building became an act of rebellion.

I do not mean to be overly celebratory of an institution whose administration and governmental oversight seemed to be categorically dysfunctional. There was widespread agreement that during the time of my research, the ordinarily chaotic and precarious institutional culture of the EMPA had descended into an even greater degree of chaos and dysfunction. Teachers who had been at the school from its founding told me that things had never been as bad as they were at that point. Several long-time faculty members confided that they were considering quitting. Javier Cohen, the tango department head, ironically observed that the combination of complicated state bureaucracy and frustrated results reminded him of a "machine for not making pancakes" (Cohen, personal communication). Yet, as Fernando, the cello teacher, told me, "we're in a chaotic moment right

now, but it's good that you see this. What defines us is chaos" (Diéguez, personal communication).

Some of the ways that the concept of *música popular* operates as a locally specific concept at EMPA differ substantially from the ways that the Anglophone world understands that concept. They are skeptical of mass culture, and insist upon *música popular* as an expression allied with a subaltern position. And while *música popular* is certainly defined in opposition to the Western art music of the conservatory system, EMPA as an institution challenges even that distinction. It claims an outsider status for *música popular* while simultaneously advocating for its greater inclusion within the very system it critiques.

Despite the linguistic and cultural differences in constructions of popular music and *música popular*, the case of the Escuela de Música Popular de Avellaneda also bears important commonalities with similar projects worldwide. The particular forms in which institutional dysfunction and conflict manifested themselves at EMPA were certainly a result of the particular local actors, histories, and power structures. But the contradictions inherent in the notion of institutionalizing an anti-institutional curriculum are more broadly experienced. As Wayne Bowman (2004: 38) has observed, "if popular music's meaning and identity are fundamentally unsettled, a music education profession that takes such music seriously can scarcely evade unsettledness itself". My research period in the EMPA was characterized by nothing if not institutional unsettledness. While that unsettledness undoubtedly complicated the educational experience for students and teachers alike, it also provided the strongest credible evidence that an education at EMPA was not just musical but also thoroughly *popular*.

Endnotes

¹ All translations from Spanish are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

² Silvia Aballay, personal correspondence with Coriún Aharonián (Aharonián 2007).

³ I use the term "field" here in the sense of Bourdieu's field of cultural production. I offer a more complete analysis of *música popular* and its role in that field in O'Brien 2010.

⁴ The director was referring to the iconic Mexican-Puerto Rican bolero group of the mid-twentieth century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the members of the EMPA community who made this project possible. In particular, Ricardo Cantore, Javier Cohen, Fernando Diéguez, Ariel Goldemberg, "Toro" Stafforini, and Lilián Saba were especially generous with their time and knowledge. I also thank this journal's two reviewers for their constructive feedback. Financial support for this research was supported by a William S. Livingston Fellowship from the University of Texas at Austin.

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