Marxism, nationalism and popular music in revolutionary Cuba[1]

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Among the ever-growing body of publications on popular music, all but a small minority have tended to deal exclusively with the capitalist world. The relative neglect of the workings of popular music in socialist countries has led to an unfortunate lacuna in descriptive studies and, perhaps more importantly, a potential bias in theoretical studies. Popular cultures in socialist states may share many features with their counterparts in the capitalist world, but they are also likely to differ in several important aspects, including, for example, the role of the market, of the bureaucracy, of state cultural policy, the limits on commercialism and the entire ideological climate fostered by socialism. Consequently, many of the theoretical generalisations about popular music, based on studies of the capitalist world, must be revised or qualified when socialist countries are considered.

This article explores some of the attitudes toward the different kinds of popular music in Cuba and discusses aspects of the relationship between these attitudes, popular tastes, cultural policy and musical ideology. As will be seen, the Cuban popular music world is fraught with as many controversies, contradictions and complexities as popular music elsewhere; most of the issues examined here derive largely from the diversity of opinions encountered (even within the bureaucracy itself), and from the frequent lack of consistency between Marxist theories of art, Cuban cultural policy as explicitly stated and policy as actually practised. This article focuses on such attitudes and politics, rather than on the music itself, primarily because the influence of the Revolution, in my view, is far more evident in such extra-musical parameters than it is in the realm of musical style.

In capitalist countries the course of popular music is influenced primarily by the market, in the broadest sense of the word. In socialist Cuba, aspects of the 'market' – for example, supply and demand – remain fundamentally influential, but the 'demand', including taste, may naturally be strongly affected by the class revolution, while aspects of the 'supply' – especially, the diffusion of music – may be largely determined by official cultural policy. This policy may often be vaguely defined, but ultimately it is the state which, at some level, weighs economic and aesthetic priorities and makes decisions regarding such matters as the funding of music education, the opening of a new provincial radio station and the import and sale price of electric guitars. Thus, any attempt to place contemporary Cuban popular music in the context of its social background must deal with the relation of that music to Cuban socialist ideology.

Several Cuban musicologists – before and after the establishment of the

Revolutionary government in 1959 – have explicitly denounced the negative effects of the commercial North American music industry on Cuba. From the present Cuban perspective, development of music in the pre-revolutionary period was stunted by the concentration of musical education and patronage in the urban upper and middle classes, and more importantly, it was warped by commercial foreign influences. From the socialist view, the artist, while 'free' in the bourgeois sense, was a slave of the market, obliged to commercialise or sensationalise his art, or, often, to leave the country to seek work in New York or elsewhere (see Otero 1972, p. 13).

Cuban authors Alejo Carpentier and Juan Villar lament that the international popularity of Cuban music in this century paradoxically led to its adulteration and sterilisation, as Cuban artists and foreign imitators tailored their music to the tastes of Parisian and North American audiences (in Cuba as well as abroad); in doing so they simplified and domesticated rhythms, commercialised the melodies with banal harmonies and lush arrangements, and produced cheap marriages of the vital Cuban dances with the anaemic foxtrot (Carpentier 1946, p. 360, and Villar 1981, pp. 6–9). While Cuban music was thus commercialised, the Cuban media deluged islanders with the most commercial and banal North American music (Thomas 1971, p. 1164).

Thus, from a purely nationalistic perspective the inundation of foreign pop music was offensive to some Cubans (musicians and musicologists perhaps more so than the ordinary person); from the socialist point of view, the commercial nature of this music made it doubly objectionable. Villar's indictment of the commercialisation of Cuban music during this period is representative: the commodification of music, he argues, led to a deformation of taste and ideology, under which art was used as a means of ideological penetration by the dominant classes which controlled the media. This situation encouraged a passive, consumerist mentality by means of presenting an escapist, artificial, inverted portrait of reality – a portrait that obscured class antagonisms and frustrated individual and collective self-realisation (Villar 1981).

Within a few years of attaining power, the Revolutionary government nationalised most aspects of the commercial music industry, such as nightclubs, recording companies, radio stations and concerts (Mesa-Lago 1978, p. 106). In accordance with Marxist ideology, the state has upheld the democratisation of access to culture as a fundamental goal in the same sense as literacy (Otero 1972, pp. 13–4). Although hampered by shortages of funds and teachers, and by a certain degree of chaos resulting from bureaucratic inexperience and the dislocation of the economy, the first decade of the Revolution saw a 'remarkable improvement of material facilities for cultural expansion' (Mesa-Lago 1978, p. 106). Music education has been introduced throughout the countryside via neighbourhood cultural centres; where funds have been lacking, songs have been taught in schools via the radio (León 1984). Competitions and performance forums for amateurs have been established (such as *Todo el mundo canta* and the Adolfo Guzmán competition) and regular festivals of all kinds of Cuban music have been held, public admission being free or at a nominal cost. While record production appears to have stagnated somewhat (Díaz Ayala 1981, pp. 286–7), publication of books (including musical literature) increased exponentially (Otero 1972, p. 50), radio transmission potential tripled (Castro 1977) and prices were lowered at the now-nationalised clubs like the Tropicana. Mesa-Lago's table of average salaries (1981, p. 154) illustrates the high

priority given to musical entertainers: out of thirty-six occupations in all major fields, the salary of a 'well-known musician' (700 pesos monthly) is equalled or surpassed by only four other occupations (cabinet minister, hospital director, highly skilled technician and cane-cutter).

It is clear that the state has had no reservations about promoting Cuban popular music, and that, on the contrary, it has recognised Cuban popular music as a vital and valuable part of its national heritage; hence, for example, Ché Guevara's oft-quoted ideal of 'socialism with *pachanga*' (*pachanga* was a Cuban popular dance of the 1950s), Culture Minister Armando Hart Davalos' reference to the 'festive character' of the Revolution (1983, p. 68) and the explicit support given to national music in the Declaration of the 1971 National Congress on Education and Culture. This kind of state support contrasts with policies in some other socialist countries, such as Hungary, where popular music is at best tolerated by the government (Szemere 1983). The crucial difference, of course, is that in the Soviet bloc, popular music consists mostly of styles imported from the capitalist West, whereas Cuba has fostered its own vital popular music.

In 1963 Fidel Castro asserted that the guidelines for cultural policy should be: 'Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.' On a practical level, this dictum has entailed, not surprisingly, an intolerance of counter-Revolutionary song texts, and, more specifically, a radio ban on all music produced by defectors (which, as Díaz Ayala cynically notes (1981, p. 278), would also apply to the music of *pachanga* inventor Eduardo Davidson). Yet in many cases, the guideline has proved too general to apply to music, whose inherent ideology may be difficult to decode; furthermore, cultural policy has at times been more restrictive than Fidel's maxim might imply. Yet as we shall see, Cuban cultural policy, far from being monolithic and inflexible, has generally been responsive to the diversity of tastes and attitudes within Cuba.

Rock and jazz in socialist Cuba

North American and British pop music – mostly rock – continues to enjoy considerable popularity in Cuba, and several young people interviewed by this author expressed their preference for it over Cuban music. The true extent of its popularity, however, is difficult to estimate. Record stores generally feature at most a few uncopyrighted 45 rpm discs of top hits from abroad, and thus record sales cannot be used as an index of demand (cassettes are only beginning to make headway in Cuba). Public exposure and access to foreign pop music occur largely through radio (Cuban and Miami-based stations), TV music video broadcasts and recordings brought by visiting Cuban-Americans. In general, tastes tend to correspond to those abroad, with black musicians like Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie appearing to enjoy particular appeal. A survey of the dance music tastes of 100 students in Havana, conducted in 1982 by members of the Center for Research and Development of Cuban Music (CIDMUC) revealed that among this group, the popularity of *salsa* and Cuban dance music was roughly equal to that of the current rock favourites in Cuba at the time (Saenz and Vinueza 1982).

Cuban radio and television devote a considerable amount of air play to rock music, both in response to its popularity and from a realisation that boycotting North American pop music would simply lead more young Cubans to tune in to commercial Florida stations, the Voice of America, or the Reagan Administration's

Radio Martí, all of which can be picked up in much of Cuba except during inclement weather. Cuban media deliberately exclude, however, foreign songs or music videos which they feel promote sex and violence (Pereira 1984).

In early 1973 the Cuban government did prohibit stations from transmitting any North American or British pop and folk music, alleging that such music promoted alienation (Mesa-Lago 1978, p. 111). Not even 'protest' songs were tolerated, for Cuban officialdom regarded North American pop culture, and especially hippie culture, as self-indulgent, drug-induced escapism (drug use appears to be minimal among Cuban youth and is harshly punished), and an aberrant degeneration of bourgeois culture (Thomas 1971, p. 1435). The ban appears to have been part of a general defensive crackdown in culture and ideology, encompassing a tightening of censorship, curbs on travel permits for foreigners, opposition to 'imperialist' cinema, television and art, and condemnation of writers like Sartre and Carlos Fuentes who had protested Cuba's harassment of the poet Padilla.

Tensions were relaxed in 1974 and American pop music was back on Cuban radio to stay. Mesa-Lago (1978, p. 111) relates the softened stance to the change in US presidency and the atmosphere of détente following the Vietnam withdrawal, although it is clear that popular demand played an important role in the resumption of rock broadcasting.

At present in Cuba, rock elements are not at all uncommon in dance music and orchestral *canción* arrangements, and a few groups – especially Síntesis – specialise in eclectic rock. Rock, like other imported forms, also continues spontaneously to generate Cubanised hybrids in the realm of dance as well as music. In late 1985, for example, Havana teenagers originated a new, intricate dance style, dubbed the 'Juanito', inspired by the contemporary hits of Madonna and Phil Collins/Phillip Bailey. The Cuban media were quick to incorporate the rapidly spreading phenomenon into their programming; 'Joven Joven', a television show featuring amateur dancers, began featuring outstanding 'Juanito' dancers, but, significantly, they were accompanied not by imported pop, but by newly-composed Cuban music written specially for the dance (Salas 1986).

Rock music is primarily a product of the capitalist West, and the world view and lifestyles associated with it are clearly capitalist in flavour; as such its popularity in socialist Cuba presents a contradiction that Cuban commentators have been obliged to confront. Attitudes vary considerably; at one extreme are those who denounce rock's relation to cultural colonialism and the corrupting influence of the capitalist market on artistic creation. A more moderate view is represented by Argeliers León, one of Cuba's leading composers and ethnomusicologists. León denies that the popularity of North American and British pop in Cuba reflects any failure of Cubans to liberate themselves from mainland culture. In an interview with the author, León (1984) pointed out that Cuba has freely adopted musical elements from North America since the nineteenth century, when blackface minstrel groups visited the island. León similarly denied that the foreign pop music heard in Cuba was inherently commercial or ideological in character; rather, he argued, rock imported to Cuba loses its negative features, for the alleged commercialism, hedonism, and excessive individualism of rock are extra-musical features dependent upon their cultural milieu and dissemination. Thus, he concluded, 'If we can borrow from North American music when it serves us, it's a form of winning against imperialism – taking what good the North American people have to offer, without their system.'[2] (This theme is echoed in an interview by J. A. Pola with composer Rembert Egües (Pola 1983b, p. 21).)

Other Cubans (not to mention many foreign ethnomusicologists) would question whether any music or art can shed the ideology of the class that sired it. The 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, for example, declared 'Culture, like education, is not nor can ever be apolitical or impartial, insofar as it is a social and historical phenomenon conditioned by the necessities of the social classes and their struggles through the course of history'. Further, Cuban musicians like Enrique Jorrín (Pola 1983a, p. 21) have continued to voice their disapproval of the indiscriminate acceptance of foreign pop music in Cuba on familiar nationalistic grounds (and Jorrín has also complained of a *chachachá* radio show of his being replaced by a rock programme (Martínez 1979, p. 74)). But, as we have seen, it is León's tolerant view of North American music – including rock – that seems to be most congruent with state policy *as practised*. While his denial of the inherent ideology of rock music (or music in general) may be at odds with much of Marxist theory, on another level he is expressing a faith in the strength of Cuban socialist culture to be able to absorb foreign influences while retaining its own integrity. More important, León argues, than the nature of the music itself are extra-musical factors like the use to which music is put, and the ideological orientation of the listener which conditions the way he apprehends music. León's views are echoed in those of Jorrín (Pola 1983a, p. 21) and others (e.g., Villar 1981, p. 7), who argue that while some pop music, for example, may have a reactionary class ideology, it can be digested with impunity by an educated and politically aware audience that is ideologically prepared not to be lured by inherent commercialism. Accordingly, most Cuban musicians themselves seem to welcome contacts with and exposure to foreign music and musicians.

Cuban policy toward jazz has been even more problematic than that regarding rock. Jazz, of course, is another imported music, and its image has suffered in Cuba, as elsewhere, from associations with drug abuse and bohemian ghetto life (although jazz has heavily influenced Cuban dance music since the 1930s). Soviet disapproval of jazz (documented in Starr 1983) may also have influenced Cuban official views. Cuban saxophonist Paquito d'Rivera has related the frustration he experienced in trying to perform jazz professionally in Cuba. D'Rivera's talent had been recognized by the state, which trained him at the Havana Conservatory and installed him as director of a prestigious modern music orchestra. But d'Rivera's ambition since childhood had been to play jazz, and his attempts to do so were continually discouraged by the government. In 1974, he joined the eclectic 'super-group' Irakere, which, under Jesus 'Chucho' Valdés, developed an original synthesis of Afro-Cuban cult music, Cuban dance music, jazz and other forms. For two years the government avoided granting official recognition and promotion to Irakere, yet their popularity and renown soon spread abroad as well as in Cuba itself, such that the state now lionises them as the foremost Cuban group (Jeske 1983). (In 1980, however, d'Rivera defected to the USA in order to fulfil his lifelong dream of pursuing a jazz career in New York.)

Since the late 1970s, jazz has been enjoying full state support, with several salaried groups not only performing on the island, but often sent abroad for tours. Annual jazz festivals, featuring Cuban musicians as well as visitors like Dizzy Gillespie, have been held since 1979, and in 1986 the state sponsored the opening of Havana's first fulltime jazz club, 'Maxim's' (Salas and Ojeda 1986).

Cuban dance music

The field of Cuban dance music encompasses *rumba*, *chachachá*, *guaracha*, *mambo*, *danzón*, *son pregón*, and above all, *son*. These genres constitute the core of the music which Puerto Ricans and Latinos in the USA often call *salsa*, but Cubans, as we shall discuss, apply that term only to the foreign-produced imitations or offshoots of their own dance music, for which there is no single comparable term except *música bailable cubana* (Cuban dance music).

Discussions of most of the individual genres concerned may be found in several Cuban publications (e.g., Carpentier 1946, León 1972, and Urfé 1982) and a few English-language ones (e.g., Borbolla 1980, Singer and Friedman 1977, Roberts 1972, Crook 1982). While the reader is urged to consult these sources for more detailed information, the relevant genres are briefly outlined here:

Properly speaking, *rumba* refers to a secular Afro-Cuban music-dance genre performed vocally with percussion instruments. In this century, elements of the most popular variety of *rumba*, the *guaguancó*, have gradually been incorporated into the *son*, which itself has been the predominant Cuban popular musical genre since the 1920s, and which is regarded as the Cuban musical expression par excellence (Orozco 1980), synthesising Afro-Cuban, Hispanic and jazz elements in an uniquely Cuban manner. *Son* itself has undergone several evolutionary stages, rendering the term somewhat imprecise. The genre became widely popular in the 1920s, when it was typically played by an ensemble of guitar, *tres* (guitar-like instrument of three double or triple courses), trumpet, percussion and voices. The *son*'s formal structure bears some affinities with that of the *rumba*, particularly in the presence of a final, often long, call-and-response section (the *montuno*) with a repeated harmonic ostinato. In subsequent decades (particularly in the music of Arsenio Rodríguez), piano and other horns were added, individual percussion patterns standardised, tempo accelerated, and instrumental arrangements became more elaborate, while the basic structure of the *son* has continued to be the backbone of Cuban dance music and *salsa*.

The now-archaic *danzón* has a more European derivation and character; from the early decades of this century, it was most typically played by a *charanga* ensemble of flute, violins, piano, and percussion. In the 1940s and 1950s it was one source for the development of the *mambo* – a rather vague term generally denoting an up-tempo instrumental composition with elaborate antiphonal horn sections – and for the *chachachá*. The latter term is often used loosely to denote a characteristic medium-tempo composite rhythm, but more precisely denotes a genre using that rhythm, performed by charanga bands.

Guaracha is an up-tempo dance piece, popular in the nineteenth century, with a picaresque and often bawdy text. The *son pregón* is distinguished by its text, which imitates the calls of street vendors. The *son pregón* and, to some extent, the *guaracha* bear affinities with the *son* in rhythm and formal structure.

Cuban dance music is regarded as having reached a peak of sorts in the 1950s, especially in the musics of Benny Moré, Chappotín, Miguelito Cuní and others. Since 1959 there have been no dramatic revolutions in the field of Cuban dance music, a fact which has led a few writers to call it stagnant (e.g., Thomas 1971, p. 1464). However, aside from a few specific trends such as the brief furore of the *mozambique* rhythm in the 1960s, there have been some notable developments, albeit within the basic stylistic frameworks inherited from the 1950s. For the last several

years, the most popular and acclaimed groups have been Los Van Van, led by composer-arranger Juan Formell, and the aforementioned Irakere. Dance music innovations have not been confined to these two groups, but they are the two most distinguished, accessible (on recordings) and representative bands. Van Van's novelty lies primarily in the frequent use of the new *songo* rhythm (which has a stronger downbeat than the more fluid *rumba* or *son* rhythms) and the distinctive ensemble timbre resulting from the addition of four trombones to a *charanga* format and a more active use of the flute in arrangements. Irakere's innovations include: the occasional combination of traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms and solos in modern jazz style within the format of an extended piece (e.g., their *Misa Negra*, as recorded on Columbia 35655); the use of more elaborate arrangements, rock rhythms, and/or *son* rhythms with a far more active bass pattern (as in 'Aguanile' on the same record); and the use (or parody) of classical music, and forms such as the *conga*.

Profundity is generally not expected of the lyrics in Cuban dance music. On the whole, their subject-matter does not differ from that of the traditional *son* or *rumba*. The most common themes are love, daily life, praise of Cuban dance music itself, or praise of Havana, Santiago de Cuba, or of Cuba in general. A few songs concern the Afro-Cuban cults and a significant minority are revolutionary (e.g., Van Van's 'Qúe palo es ese'). While the socialist content expressed in the latter may be new, it is best appreciated as continuing the tradition of political *rumbas* and *congas*, and revolutionary/nationalistic *puntos* and *canciones* dating from the nineteenth century on.

The fact that most Cuban dance groups play more conventional music than Irakere or Van Van, coupled with the fondness of Cuban youth for foreign pop music and *salsa* has led to a prodigious concern among journalists, musicians, producers and listeners with the state of Cuban dance music. In the words of one Cuban journalist, 'Deformation of style in dance orchestras and their lack of creativity are two of the most discussed topics of late in the world of Cuban music' (Vázquez 1986, p. 7). The variety of opinions on the subject and the depth of the preoccupation are best reflected in numerous interviews in Cuban magazines, especially *Bohemia*, and in the lengthy series of interviews with musicians, musicologists and producers in *Revolución y Cultura* entitled 'Música popular: sigue la encuesta' ('Popular music: the survey continues') (Martinez 1979–80; for full details of interviews, see References).

Some of those questioned (for example, journalist José Rivero and Pedro Izquierdo) as well as musicologists interviewed by myself (including Argeliers León and Olavo Alen) denied the existence of any stagnation or demoralisation in the realm of Cuban dance music. (It is of course possible that some of those I interviewed may have been less likely to express disapproval to a non-Cuban than to a Cuban.) Others complained of a lack of creativity in the field (composer Rodrigo Prats), an 'avalanche of facilism' and mediocrity (TV director Douglas Poncé), cheap and tasteless texts (singer Amaury Pérez Vidal) and a general inability to compete with music from abroad (composer Enrique Jorrín). Most commonly expressed, however, was the opinion that while Cuban dance music remained more or less vital, its popularity was undermined by poor media diffusion (such as the excessive reiteration of the same few hits (see Rodolfo de la Fuente)), unfair media domination by Havana musicians (Osmundo Calzado) and bureaucratic obstacles to exposure and recognition (see, for instance, José Rivero). The last complaint was voiced with particular stridence by defector Paquito d'Rivera, who deplored the bureaucratic control restricting, for example, movement of a musician from one band to another,

the number of live concerts, and above all, the need for 'inside' bureaucratic contacts and assistance (*la plantilla*) in order to get ahead.

The complaints of d'Rivera and others have become too insistent to be ignored at the upper levels of the government. Hence, in his Main Report to the Third Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, Fidel Castro himself stated:

> The relationship between the arts and the mass media has been weak. The gulf between artists and performers, and their counterparts working in radio and television, has detracted from the full development of our artistic and creative potential. (Castro 1986, p. 7).

It is of interest that some of the criticisms of the Cuban media and music bureaucracy more or less parallel those of the music industry in the capitalist world, since these two sets of institutions perform the same functions, albeit in their own ways. Just as AM radio stations in the United States may focus programming on a small number of hits, so do the Cuban media tend to concentrate on a few favourites (for instance, in 1984, Van Van's '¿Y qué tu crées?'), while musicians complain that many other fine groups are ignored.

Furthermore, denunciations of the commercialism of bourgeois music notwithstanding, there is no reason to doubt that a degree of commercialism may exist in the realm of Cuban music, especially since many Cuban musicians themselves regard popular appeal as a pre-eminent goal. While a musician's salary may not be directly related to parameters like record sales or concert attendance, salaries do vary considerably, such that a performer might well feel inclined to alter his style in order to reach a wider audience and move into a higher income category. In the absence of advertising and the competition between record companies for sales, Cuban writers tend to speak not of commercialism but instead of 'facilism' and 'populism', connoting unimaginative reliance on hackneyed sentimental effects and the attempt to appeal to a lowest-common-denominator audience.

Evidence suggests that the diffusion of music has improved greatly in the last decade; this improvement is reflected in the profusion of live concerts, the abundance of LPs filling what fifteen years previously had been the near-empty shelves of record stores, and, above all, the enlivening of media presentations with such shows as *Para bailar* (*For Dancing*), a popular television special featuring amateur dance contests with largely Cuban dance music. The latter show is singled out for praise by several interviewees (such as musicologists Helio Orovio and Zoila Gómez (in Martínez 1979)). The increased attention to creative and lively programming is attributed by *New York Times* journalist Joseph Treaster (1984) to competition from the Florida-based Radio Martí, but Cuban officials deny this explanation. The fact that many of the media improvements commenced several years ago suggests that they derive at least in part from internal factors such as the public criticisms mentioned above, from shifting policy priorities (e.g., away from exporting revolution, instead concentrating on internal quality of life), and economic stabilisation. Moreover, the criticisms voiced by some Cubans should be perceived in the context of the fundamental financial security provided for all Cubans under the Revolutionary government.

The *salsa* phenomenon

Much of the preoccupation with the state of Cuban dance music stems from the recent competition with the music now referred to as *salsa* (literally, 'hot sauce').

Salsa is sometimes distinguished from Cuban dance music by its inclusion of non-Cuban Latin dance genres, especially the Colombian *cumbia*, the Dominican *merengue*, and the Puerto Rican *plena* and *bomba*. In the repertoires of most bands, however, these genres are peripheral to the musical core constituted by the Cuban *guaracha, chachachá*, and above all, the modern *son*. *Salsa* horn instrumentation and arrangement style also may differ somewhat from that of the modern Cuban *son*, but the most important distinction between *salsa* and Cuban dance music remains non-musical: *salsa* is produced outside of Cuba, primarily by Cubans and Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico and New York City, but also by groups in Mexico, Venezuela, and other Caribbean Latin countries (where it may be called *música tropical*). While the term '*salsa*' is now in extremely common usage (even in some Cuban contexts), its artificiality is acknowledged by many Latin musicians (Roberts 1979, p. 188); the statement of band-leader Tito Puente is typical: 'The only salsa I know comes in a bottle: I play Cuban music' (Martínez 1982).

Salsa, and the *son* style therein, derive primarily from Cuban dance music of the 1950s, although this music had certainly established its own roots in Puerto Rico by then. Many staples of the *salsa* repertoire are merely recycled Cuban *sones*. Cuban-born *salsa* musicians like Celia Cruz have continued to record and perform Cuban standards, and compositions of modern Cuban songwriters (especially, for example, Son 14's Adalberto Alvarez) continue to be widely recorded by New York and Puerto Rican *salsa* groups, who take advantage of the relative inability of Cuban groups to market their own music abroad.

In general, *salsa* texts do not differ dramatically from those of Cuban dance music. Puerto Rican groups naturally tend to sing nationalistic songs about their own homeland rather than about Cuba, while songs in the 'daily life' category may describe the exasperation of waiting for a New York subway (e.g., Rubén Blades' 'Numero Seis') rather than the overcrowding of Havana (e.g., Van Van's 'La Habana no aguanta más'). The music of collaborators Willie Colón (composer and bandleader) and Rubén Blades (singer) is often singled out for its eclectic juxtaposition of different Latin styles, its elaborate orchestral arrangements and above all, its greater attention to texts; many of these texts describe *barrio* life, indict social evils, or support socio-political reform in fraternal Latin nations like El Salvador.

While many *salsa* texts call for pan-Latin solidarity (e.g., Tito Allen/Ray Barretto, 'Indestructible'), most avoid committing themselves to either a right- or left-wing stance. This ambiguity is not surprising considering the extreme polarisation of the *salsa* listening audience, from radical proletariats in New York, San Juan and Caracas to extreme right-wing Cuban-Americans based in Florida. Elements of the latter group have been particularly influential, blacklisting Rubén Blades for his support of the Sandinista government (Blades visited Nicaragua in 1984) and threatening to boycott Oscar d'León after his recent visit to Cuba; d'León, under pressure to mollify his Cuban-American audience, subsequently criticised the Cuban revolution (Pereira 194).

The use of the term *salsa* for Latin dance music may derive from the song 'Echale salsita' of the Septeto Nacional (Roberts 1979, p. 187) and later, from an early-1960s Caracas radio programme entitled *La hora de la salsa* (*The Salsa Hour*) (Pierre Goldman, in Martínez 1982). It seems clear, however, that the term's popularisation was associated with Fania Records, the largest New York record company specialising in Latin dance music. Fania's head and founder, Jerry Masucci, promoted the term in a

deliberate and successful attempt to give a single marketable and catchy label to the various genres comprising Latin dance music (Martínez 1982). The term stuck, and the last decade has seen a tremendous vogue of *salsa* in the United States, Puerto Rico and other Latin-American countries.

It is not surprising that Cuban views of the *salsa* phenomenon are highly ambivalent, and have been debated avidly in the media and in such contexts as the conference on the *son* held in Santiago de Cuba in 1982. On the one hand, while Cubans naturally appreciate the vogue of their musical styles abroad, some resent how the use of the term '*salsa*' as a marketing label obscures the true origins of the styles it comprehends (see, for example, C. Puebla in Pola 1983, p. 31). Cuban musicologist Martha Castellón (1982) writes, 'In countries like Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela, young people, knowing nothing of past Cuban music, think that "salsa" is as modern as disco, that it has no relation to the past.' Castellón regards the *salsa* phenomenon as another illustration of the cultural and informational domination of Latin America by the North American media, wherein Latino satellite states may be ignorant of and isolated from the cultures of their neighbours, dependent instead on the United States for cultural and ideological input from abroad. Since the United States has made a particular effort to isolate Cuba economically, diplomatically, culturally and ideologically, the commercially successful recycling of Cuban music under the 'alienating and mystifying slogan' (Torres 1982) of '*salsa*' is seen as especially duplicitous. In a similar, vein, Cuban musicologist Dora Ileana Torres (1982) regards the phenomenon as a typical instance of North American imperialist exploitation wherein a 'primary product' (in this case, musical style) is extracted without due compensation from an under-developed nation and is then packed and marketed as a North American product. The appropriation of Latin music is thus, she argues, in the tradition of the 'brain drain' under which many Latino musicians migrated to the United States to work.

Most Cuban commentators – including Torres and Castellón – are generally quick to point out that the *salsa* vogue in itself is a positive and healthy phenomenon, despite the artificiality of the rubric '*salsa*' and its relation to cultural imperialism. Cuban musicians themselves appreciate how the *salsa* boom has greatly promoted and popularised Cuban music, not only abroad, but especially among Cuban youths, who might otherwise be less familiar with their own musical heritage (see also A. Alvarez in Peñalver Moral 1983, p. 23 and composer P. Izquierdo in Martínez 1980). Says Van Van's leader Juan Formell, 'With Oscar d'León and Rubén Blades, our young people start to enjoy traditional Cuban music' (in Rivero and Pola 1983, p. 21).

Cubans also view with pleasure the pan-Latin solidarity for which so many *salsa* songs explicitly call, insofar as it serves to counter North American cultural dominance. *Salsa*, asserts Martínez (1982), 'reflects the vigor of the Latin American musical identity, erected as a rampart against the racial discrimination and acculturating designs of the dominating Yankees.' Similarly, Torres (1982) writes of the paradoxical 'boomerang' effect of the vogue, by which *salsa*'s very commercial success contributes to a growing Latino cultural solidarity; 'that is, in spite of the manipulations of the gigantic mechanism of the North American culture industry, *salsa* has developed into a shared song form of the (Caribbean) Latin American peoples.'

Insofar as *salsa* songs do express this solidarity, their ideology is well-received in Cuba. Hence Rubén Blades and Willie Colón are particular favourites on the island

and Blades' occasional encounters with and praise of Cuban musicians are featured in the Cuban press. The aforementioned CIDMUC survey revealed that while the poll group enjoyed *salsa* and Cuban dance music roughly equally, they expressed a marked preference for some of the *salsa* texts, especially those of Blades and Colón. (Indeed, the text emphasis and formal experimentation of Colón and Blades renders much of their music less suitable for dancing than for active listening.)

Other aspects of *salsa* ideology are less appreciated in Cuba, such as the perceived sexism, vulgarity and superstar flamboyance of Oscar d'León's texts and stage presence (including performing onanistic antics with his upright bass), which received mixed response in his Cuban tour (Capetillo 1983, p. 21). D'León's style was effectively parodied throughout 1984 in the floor show at the popular Havana Libre club; the singer, a middle-aged woman, transformed d'León's sardonic complaint about his mistress 'Mi Negra' ('My Dark One,' i.e., dark-eyed) into a jocular diatribe against her own lazy, freeloading lover ('Mi Negro'); the act concluded with the vocalist indulging in ridiculous antics with a cardboard bass.

The popularity of *salsa* in Cuba, then, poses in itself an interesting and complex set of questions for those involved in or concerned with Cuban popular music – questions which stem from the paradoxical competition between Cuban dance music and what Cubans regard as recycled versions of that music produced in the capitalist world. As with rock, the Cuban media have disseminated *salsa* in accordance with popular demand, while commentators on popular culture continue to debate the issues of nationalism, ideology and cultural identity posed by the *salsa* vogue.

The *canción romantica*

We may now turn to music which is not intended for dance. In Cuba, the traditional genres in this category are collectively referred to as *trova*, and they include the (Cuban) *bolero, criolla, guajira, clave* and above all, the *canción*. Most of these originated in the nineteenth century, their primary models being Spanish *canciones* (*boleros, tiranas*, and *polos*), German Lieder, French *romanzas*, and especially, Italian operatic arias. Products primarily of the black urban petty bourgeoisie, the *trova* songs dealt with love, the Cuban countryside and nationalism (Gómez 1979, pp. 22–3). The most renowned composers were Sindo Garay (1886–1968) and Pepe Sánchez (1856–1918). From the 1930s on, 'intermediate' *trova* incorporated features of the Cuban *son* (as in the *bolero-son* of Miguel Matamoros), but also came increasingly under the influence of North American popular music. This last trend contributed to the rise in the 1940s of *filin* (from 'feeling'), a more unabashedly sentimental *canción*, also of urban working class origin, still typically performed, in *trova* tradition, by one or two vocalists with accompanying guitar. While traditional *trova* still abounds in Cuba, since 1950, under continuing foreign influence, the *canción* has adopted a mainstream international style, paralleling the course of its sentimental popular counterparts in the United States and Europe, that is, in the format of a solo singer backed by lush orchestral arrangements, with relatively standardised formal structure, and song lyrics dealing almost exclusively with heterosexual intimacy.

Thus, while one may trace the development and cultivation of the Cuban *canción* over the last century, in its present state it is identical in form and content to the international style of sentimental slow song, as rendered by such performers as

Barbra Streisand and Julio Iglesias. Cuban *canción* singers also replicate the melodramatic and affected stage mannerisms of their foreign counterparts.

The commercial and bourgeois associations of this music are, if anything, even more striking than in rock music and as a result the pop *canción*'s extraordinary popularity in socialist Cuba may well seem anomalous. The modern *canción romantica*, whether by Cuban or foreign artists, appears to be the single most predominant musical genre on the Cuban media, and it also dominates the large Cuban music competitions, notably *Todo el mundo canta* and the annual Adolfo Guzmán forum (referred to by the newspaper *Tribuna* as 'the most important national musical event'). Further, whereas in other countries such music may be associated with the older generation, in Cuban competitions such as the Guzmán, the vast majority of singers and composers are under thirty-five years of age.

Canción texts are almost invariably romantic and apolitical. In the three-day festival of the 1984 Guzmán competition in Havana, the several entries by *nueva trova* 'members' were not exceptions to this pattern. On the media they are broadcast side-by-side with similar foreign songs like 'My Way' – both in Spanish and English versions – with its very un-socialist celebration of individualism ('What is a man, what has he got, if not himself? . . . The record shows I took the blows and did it my way'). Silvio Rodríguez does point out, however, the decline of picaresque 'bar songs' portraying the male protagonist drowning his sorrows in liquor and disparaging a 'cursed woman' ('Areito' 1975, p. 87).

Aside from the popular appeal of the modern *canción*, Cuban writers and commentators on music are as ambivalent towards it as they are towards *salsa* and rock. On the one hand, the long evolution and cultivation of the *canción* in Cuba enables Cubans to regard it as a native form, even if its elements are foreign (Alen 1984), such that the classics of Sindo Garay and Pepe Sánchez are ranked among the most sublime expressions of Cuban popular culture (Gómez 1979, p. 23). Hence, some of those interviewed by the author (including Argeliers León, Olavo Alen, and Alfredo Pereira) do not regard the 'commercial' sound of the sentimental *canción* as anomalous in Cuba. Further, Cubans do point out that whether or not the content of such music is revolutionary, the admission price of live performances *is*; for a mere peso (about one dollar), one could, for example, attend the Guzmán finalists concerts in the luxurious Karl Marx theatre and hear Cuba's top *canción* singers backed by full orchestra, with the most opulent and glittery Las Vegas-style stage lighting effects and sound system. State subsidies of such events are regarded as means towards the democratisation of culture, in the sense that they render such extravaganzas accessible to everyone.

Nevertheless, the modern sentimental *canción* is not unanimously accepted, and indeed, it is the butt of much criticism in periodicals. Thus, *nueva trova* singer Amaury Pérez deplores the melodramatic pop style which 'becomes ever more remote from our own popular music, and especially from dance music' (in Martínez 1980). Similarly, vocalist Miriam Ramos laments the machismo and 'negative ideology' of the *canción*, which appears 'in open contradiction with the epoch in which we live, and in frank opposition to the image of love which the young should have in maturing' (in Martínez 1980). Juan Villar indicts the commercial *canción* as a fabrication of the bourgeois music industry, relying on facile, catchy melodies, lush banal orchestration, simplified rhythms and shallow, escapist texts which obscure social reality. Thus, he argues, this kind of *canción*, 'given the disappearance of the economic causes which engendered it, has no reason to persist, much less to be

sung, in our country, since its social function is nil'. Its continued popularity is due to the 'deformation of taste, the responsibility for which lies with the mass media, and, more explicitly, the dominant classes which always controlled them, promulgating a music which responded only to their interests' (Villar 1981, p. 9).

The popularity of the *canción* in Cuba reveals, of course, that it still has considerable social function; what is at question is whether or not this function is incompatible with socialism. As with rock and *salsa*, state policy, reflected in the substantial promotion and dissemination of the *canción*, is considerably more tolerant and indulgent of popular demand then are the attitudes of critics like Villar. Again, one may well note the contrasts with the authoritarian policies of certain other socialist countries, such as China during the Cultural Revolution.

Nueva trova

Thus far all the musical genres we have considered have been either foreign or pre-revolutionary in origin. As we have seen, the popularity of the former genres, and the relative stasis of the latter have generated ambivalent responses among defenders of the Cuban Revolution. The one genre that is clearly a product of the Revolution, and that explicity reflects and promotes its ideology, is *nueva trova*. *Nueva trova*, the Cuban variety of the pan-Latin *nueva canción*, has justifiably received some scholarly attention in English as well as Spanish publications (see Fairley 1985, Carrasco 1982, Acosta 1981, Benmayor 1981). Stylistically, the genre can be seen as an extension of traditional *trova*, especially the Cuban *canción*; *nueva trova* singers often stress the continuity of their art with traditional *trova*, and they occasionally incorporate traditional poetic forms like the ten-line *décima* in their songs (Acosta 1981, p. 15). However, the style is modernised by a free use of elements from North American rock and pop music, occasionally from non-Cuban Latin folk traditions (especially of the Andes and Puerto Rico), and by the use of modern instrumentation (including synthesisers). The traditional elements are used in a self-conscious manner, in an explicit effort to revive Cuban folkloric styles by giving them new content (León 1984). The use of other Latin forms and instruments is seen as expressing fraternal solidarity; sometimes, this may be more symbolic than musically functional, as, for example, when the group Manguaré uses Andean drums and flutes in a song whose style and texture remain that of North American 'soft rock'. *Nueva trova*, in a word, can be comprehended as a re-interpretation of traditional Cuban *trova*, as a regional efflorescence of the pan-Latin *nueva canción* movement, and, lastly, as one manifestation of the cluster of socially conscious musics that rose to prominence in the Americas as a whole (including the USA) in the late 1960s.

The revolutionary aspect of *nueva trova* lies, then, primarily in its texts, and in the socio-political movement which it represents. On the one hand, the ideology of *nueva trova* lyrics has roots in such sources as the nineteenth-century nationalistic and revolutionary *puntos* and *canciones*, and the *guarachas* of Carlos Puebla. The socialist content, naturally, is more recent than the nineteenth century, drawing inspiration from the verse of the poets Neruda, Vallejo and Guillén, as well as progressive North American singers like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez (Acosta 1981, p. 11). Poetic style ranges from highbrow surrealism to more simple and accessible verse. As often as not, the subject matter may be love or personal relationships rather than socio-political affairs, but these matters are seen as integrally related in

the more humane society envisioned by *nueva trovadores*. Hence, composers stress their deliberate avoidance of *machismo*, objectification of women ('your pearly teeth', etc.) and romantic stereotypes and rhetoric (Acosta 1981, p. 22).

Performance presentation also contrasts with that of the sentimental *canción*. As Benmayor observes, there is a conscious endeavour to demystify the artist, partly through frequent free live performances (1981, p. 26).

From its inception, therefore, the *nueva trova* has waged war on banality and commercialism in song. It rejects the star syndrome, night club-style performances, glitter and show. The singers appear on stage in street clothes, refuse to be made up, and strive to communicate with their audience in a natural, honest fashion (Benmayor 1981, p. 14).

Nueva canción has often been labelled 'protest' music, although musicians tend to deplore that term for its exclusively negative connotations (Fairley 1985, p. 305). Nevertheless, the movement's call for socio-political reform, pan-Latin solidarity and opposition to North American imperialism has placed it in an antagonistic relationship with several Latin American governments – the extreme example being Chile, where, since the 1973 coup it has been effectually banned as a live music (though it circulates widely on cassettes).

The initial emergence of *nueva trova* – in particular, the early songs of Rodríguez and Milanés – was regarded with ambivalence by Cuban officialdom. First, affinities with North American 'protest' music rendered it suspect; further, its frequent use of traditional *trova* elements and, in other cases, of a bland, mainstream *canción* style seemed incompatible with Ché Guevara's dictum that revolutionary art should be revolutionary in form as well as content. In the early 1970s, however, the genre succeeded in expanding from its 'haven' at the ICAIC film institute, achieving both state support and a mass base (in Cuba as well as abroad). Subsequently, *nueva trova* has been celebrated unequivocally on popular and official levels.[3] State support, indeed, has not been simply a matter of passive approval or routine administration of diffusion. Eduardo Carrasco (a founder and active member of the Chilean group Quilapayún) describes how the *nueva trova* has become

> . . . a sort of mass youth organization with representatives all over the country. Since its official birth in 1972 its members have met every year or two to discuss common problems and elect their representatives in the governing body, the Executive Directorate of the Movement of the Nueva Trova Cubana. This movement currently numbers 2,000 young people, membership depending on artistic or personal merit and the submission of works for discussion by active regional members. The basic units are called 'detachments of the *trova*', and consist of groups or soloists. From time to time these detachments meet to discuss new compositions and organizational, artistic or political problems. As can be seen, the *nueva trova* has its statutes, its organizational structures and its operational machinery, and is highly organized at every level. (Carrasco 1982, p. 616)

Due to the compatibility between *nueva trova* and Cuban cultural policy and Revolutionary goals, the genre does not present the sort of dilemmas and contradictions posed by rock, *salsa* and the sentimental *canción*. The relationship between *nueva trova* and Cuban Revolutionary ideology, however, should not be seen as inherently devoid of any potential differences or complications, insofar as many *nueva trova* songs directly address socio-political issues. Moreover, the usage, by a few *nueva trovadores*, of a mainstream, rock ballad style could expose them, progressive lyrics notwithstanding, to the allegations of commercialism occasionally directed against pop *canción* singers. Fortunately, however, the *nueva trova*

movement appears to continue to be blessed with both state support as well as the spontaneity and authenticity that come only from grassroots popularity.

Conclusions

This article has examined the relationship between the reality of popular music in Cuba and the theories and attitudes toward it expressed by officials, bureaucrats, musicians, musicologists, journalists and consumers. The attitudes expressed reflect the complex interaction of nationalism, Marxism and popular taste. Many Cuban writers have been unequivocal in their denunciation of the negative effects on Cuban music of the capitalist marketplace and alleged North American cultural imperialism. These same critics are unanimous in their praise of the effects of the Revolution on music in Cuba. Nevertheless, as we have seen, except for *nueva trova*, the realm of music in Cuba is dominated by North American rock, sentimental *canciones* in international commercial style and Cuban dance music which, whether produced in Cuba or abroad, remains on the whole very close to the styles established by the 1950s. How, then, can the seemingly anomalous persistence of pre-revolutionary and international styles be reconciled with revolutionary and nationalistic cultural policy? Does this persistence reflect either disaffection or cultural stagnation? Or, alternately, does it reflect a healthy pluralism not only tolerated but encouraged by a government that is confident of the popularity of the Revolution and its ability to encompass a diversity of cultural expressions? And, ultimately, how may music itself spontaneously reflect social revolution?

First of all, in spite of the prodigious vitality of the Cuban music scene today, it is clear that twenty-five years of socialism in Cuba have not produced revolutions or even dramatic changes in the *styles* of music popular there. Rather, the Revolution has contributed to a general and dynamic evolution and sophistication, within the broad framework of the stylistic forms inherited from the pre-revolutionary period. One might point out that this continuity contrasts with radical directions of modern Cuban cinema, architecture and painting. Cinema and painting, however, were poorly developed in pre-revolutionary Cuba, whereas popular music was a strong tradition, less likely to be drastically reformed in the space of a few decades. Moreover, alleged commercialisation notwithstanding, popular music – including dance music and *canción* – had strong working-class origins and audiences, such that the continuance of these styles in a proletarianised society is not inappropriate.

Secondly, it would seem questionable whether cultural policy has had a substantial effect on the direction of musical style, although its promotion of revolutionary content (as in *nueva trova*) is evident. The state has given unmitigated support to Cuban popular music and has attempted to satisfy the demand for foreign pop to a far greater extent than in the more rigid Soviet bloc countries. Explicit directives regulating style and diffusion, for example, along Stalinist/Zhdanovist lines, have not been implemented. Nor has the state attempted to promote 'communalised' choral and orchestral versions of traditional styles, as was done by Koutev and his followers in Bulgaria. Moreover, the media have promoted free exchange of ideas on cultural policy, albeit within a basic context of assumed support for the Revolution.

As we have seen, the opinions discussed above are far from monolithic, aside from their support for *nueva trova*. If one were to hazard extracting any sort of consensus among commentators, it would be that the state should intervene to a

greater extent than it does to promote Cuban music; but the state bureaucracy – including cultural ministers, disc jockeys and competition organisers – clearly does not hesitate to diffuse foreign or 'commercial' music in accordance with popular demand. In general, the government sees its role as negotiating and compromising in the dialectical, often conflicting demands of satisfying popular taste and educating the public at the same time. Persistent voicings of discontent have served to focus attention on the problems of bureaucratisation and sterility in the media, obliging Fidel Castro (1986, p. 16) personally to address the question and rearticulate goals:

> We want and can have radio programs that are more popular, more representative, more interesting, more entertaining and reflective of a higher cultural level.

Nueva trova is the one form which has evolved in direct relationship with the Cuban Revolution, and as a socio-cultural phenomenon it merits even more of the substantial scholarly and journalist attention it has received so far. The continuity of other musical traditions in socialist Cuba, however, suggests that on the whole, the presence of the Revolution in Cuban music is not to be sought in style or formal structure. One may perhaps argue whether that is a result of the more abstract nature of musical style, of the youth of the Revolution, or of the depth or shallowness of its roots. What is clear is that while some changes have taken place in music, they are largely extra-musical. These changes should be the subject of another study, and they would include such phenomena as: the attempted democratisation of access to musical education, performance and its general diffusion to all possible sectors of the public; the increased politicisation of song texts (in all genres); the invariable attempts to involve the audience in performances (through quizzes between songs, dance competitions, etc.); the aforementioned demystification of performers; the disassociation of music from commercials and from the capitalist market in general; and the ideological climate and propaganda which promote a different aesthetic apprehension of music on the part of the listener.

Further studies, it is hoped, will attempt to relate these factors to attitudes, policies and the course of Cuban music itself, incorporating data as yet unavailable on demographic consumption patterns among different regions and economic strata. Studies of popular culture in socialist countries are overdue, and it is hoped that this preliminary discussion may contribute toward such explorations.

Endnotes

1 This article is a revised and updated version of one published in 1985 in *The Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* (Los Angeles: UCLA) vol. 2, pp. 1–27.

2 León's statement, together with all other Spanish references in this article have been translated by the author.

3 I am grateful to Jan Fairley for supplying data on the early development of *nueva trova* and for constructive criticism of this article.

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