

“Lamento Borincano”--Canario y Su Grupo (1930)

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Canario y Su Grupo

On “Lamento borincano” and Its Many Lives

According to Rafael Hernández Marín (1891-1965), the Afro-Puerto Rican composer of “Lamento borincano,” it was on a cold December day in 1929, as he reminisced with some friends about the warmth of his homeland of Puerto Rico in a Harlem restaurant, when he approached an “almost-falling-apart-piano in a corner” and began to “spontaneously” compose the famous bolero (qtd. in Glasser 1995: 163-164). A few months later, on July 14th 1930, “Lamento borincano” was recorded for the first time by Canario y Su Grupo for RCA Victor in New York City. The song not only became a hit and an unofficial anthem for Puerto Ricans from the island and the diaspora but, being his first recording, it also helped to launch the career of lead singer Pedro Ortiz Dávila--“Dávilita”--who was 18 at the time. Manuel “Canario” Jiménez, for his part, leader of Canario y Su Grupo, already had vast experience recording. In time, he would become a renowned performer and composer of *plena* music, an Afro-Puerto Rican genre with Anglo-Caribbean influences born around the beginning of the 20th century in Ponce, Puerto Rico. The instrumentation of the song was simple: it included guitars, maracas—a legacy of Puerto Rico’s original inhabitants, the *Taínos*—and claves, the wooden sticks so emblematic of Afro-Cuban music.

Curiously, the version recorded by Canario y Su Grupo was “incomplete” insofar as it lacked one of the song’s stanzas (Malavet Vega 2015: 40-41). According to the composer’s son Alejandro “Chalí” Hernández, who oversees the Sala Museo Rafael Hernández at the Inter American University of Puerto Rico, Metropolitan Campus, Canario was in such a rush to record the song that he didn’t give his father a chance to finish it (personal communication June 13, 2018).

In this “borincano lament”—where “borincano” references Borikén, the name given to the island of Puerto Rico by the *Taíno* Indians—Hernández Marín narrates the tragic story of the *jíbaro*, the peasant, as he travels from the countryside to the city in Puerto Rico to sell his “load” only to discover that there are no buyers:

*He departs, overjoyed,
with his load for the city, ay,
for the city. . .*

*He spends the entire morning
without anyone being able to
buy his goods, ay,
buy his goods. . .*

*You can hear this lament everywhere
in my wretched Borikén, yes. [My translation]*

This “historical document” (Rodríguez 1975 [1935]: 989), which makes use of “cinematographic techniques” (Díaz Ayala 1988: 33-51), portrays the hardships suffered by the *jíbaro* in the light of the Great Depression of 1929, the passing of hurricane San Felipe in 1928, which destroyed more than 250,000 houses and caused more than 300 deaths (Rodríguez Tapia 2005: 89), and the United States’ then three-decade, on-going colonial hold of the island. In a way, the *jíbaro* of the song stands as a metonymy for Puerto Rico (“Rich Port” in English): a poor port—as Pablo Neruda famously described it in his poem “Puerto Rico, puerto pobre”—that at the time of “Lamento borincano’s” composition, was denied even the right to elect its own governors; they, instead were appointed by the U.S. Congress. Hernández Marín’s condemnation of U.S. colonialism would become even more explicit in another of his most popular songs, “Preciosa,” where he would refer to the United States as a “tyrant.” It is worth noting that Hernández Marín could compose, rehearse and reflect upon and critique the socio-political context of his homeland, largely because of his sister Victoria Hernández, who worked as his manager and booking agent, thus giving him the gift of time (Glasser 1995: 108-109).

Not surprisingly, “Lamento borincano” became dear to Puerto Ricans, and resonated throughout a Latin America subjected to varying degrees of U.S. neocolonialism and social injustice. According to musicologist Francisco López Cruz, who performed with Hernández Marín, the song “sold a great deal in all of [Latin] America. Because the Venezuelans, the Colombians, the Argentinians, all had the same problem of the *campesino* [peasant] who lived in misery” (qtd. in Glasser 1995: 165). In Mexico, where the composer lived for 16 years, the song became the main theme of a radio program produced by Hernández Marín (Rodríguez Tapia 2005: 59). Furthermore, renowned artists across generations, such as Puerto Rican singer-songwriters Daniel Santos, a star throughout Latin America, and José Feliciano and Luis Fonsi recorded it. So has Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso. In 2005, the Puerto Rican rock band Circo also recorded it, in a psychedelic version, for the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. In addition, “Lamento borincano” is a standard performed by most Puerto Rican musicians, and its emblematic melodic line is often quoted in musical improvisations.

I was 13 or 14 years old the first time I played “Lamento borincano” with my mentor, guitar and *cuatro* player Emilio “Millito” Cruz (1940-2018), ironically, it was in one of the fancy restaurants of Old San Juan or Condado during the mid-1990s, although I had heard the song years before. As a professional player of the Puerto Rican *cuatro*, Puerto Rico’s national ten-stringed guitar, playing certain songs by composer Hernández Marín was a must. Among those

was “Lamento borincano.” If American tourists expected us to perform jazz standards, such as “Autumn Leaves” and the bossa nova hit “The Girl from Ipanema”—which we did with pleasure—Puerto Ricans demanded to hear the familiar sounds of songs such as “Lamento borincano.” Keeping this balance was key to our survival as musicians: playing jazz standards guaranteed a tip from the foreigner; playing Puerto Rican songs bonded with locals who would become regulars. While “Lamento borincano’s” lyrics always struck me as powerful, I also remember being impacted by the bolero’s musical qualities.

Part A of “Lamento borincano” is written in a minor key with little syncopation, thus evoking sadness as it is musically sounded out in the Western imagination. As a *cuatro* player, this section reminded me of the *seis mapeyé*, a style of rural music that we would also perform, with its descending harmonies reminiscent of flamenco music. Part B of the song modulates to a major key and becomes extremely syncopated; thus, it evokes optimism and happiness. This part reminded me of the Puerto Rican *danza*, a 19th century musical genre known for its harmonic and melodic complexity built upon the Afro-Caribbean *cinquillo* rhythm, which often modulates from a minor to major key. Whether “Lamento borincano’s” syncopation is due to *jíbaro* music influences and its enmeshment with the Afro-Puerto Rican musical genre of *bomba* (see Quintero and Alvarez 1994) or to Hernández Marín’s experiences performing with African American Lieutenant James Reese Europe and his Harlem Hell-Fighters jazz band during the First World War (Serrano 2007), I do not know. But as a musician, it seems to me that “Lamento borincano’s” popularity across generations and geographies is not only due to its status as one of the first protest songs in Latin America (Arce 1975 [1939]: 1000). Neither is it only the consequence of being composed in the “internationally recognized genre” of the bolero or of the fact that it is a mediated product “of the entertainment industry” (Glasser 1995: 8; 165). As noted by Ruth Glasser, its status as a relatable classic is also due to its musical qualities, which simultaneously evoke the Cuban bolero, *jíbaro* music/*bomba*, the *danza*, jazz, and even the Italian opera (1995: 8).

Today, “Lamento borincano” sounds strangely familiar: it takes on yet another of its many lives. Although in contemporary Puerto Rico, *jíbaros* no longer travel to the city to sell their “loads”—in part because in a country where around 85 percent of the food is imported, there are no “loads” to be sold—this “lamento’s” critique of poverty, inequity, and psychological and material colonial violence (Fanon 1999 [1961]) still holds true. Particularly, in the light of Hurricane María and the imposition of a Fiscal Control Board by the U.S. government—an imposition that has *de facto* suspended any semblance of democratic rule in Puerto Rico. It sounds strangely familiar in a Puerto Rico that faces neoliberal policies embedded in disaster capitalism (Klein 2018); policies that are part of a long tradition of U.S. neoliberal experimentation in this “wretched Borikén,” dating back to the 1940s Operation Bootstrap industrialization era (Cruse 2018: 47-83).

As I listen to the first version of this song as recorded by Canario y Su Grupo and finish writing this review from my New York City apartment not too far away from that restaurant where, one cold December day of 1929, Hernández Marín composed “Lamento borincano” on an “almost-falling-apart-piano in a corner,” I look at my *cuatro*... and I find myself torn between celebrating this Latin American masterpiece and lamenting that I can still “hear this lament everywhere.”

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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