COMMENTARY

Unheard Voices and the Music of Resistance: Social Turmoil in Colombia

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Abstract

This commentary addresses the current social turmoil in Colombia, the role of music in protest, and the actions of the music therapy community in response to the situation.

Keywords: Protest music, Latinamerica, protests, unheard voices

If you have had access to world news in the past few months, you may have seen news about protests and social unrest in Colombia.

As a citizen and a music therapist, I feel compelled to comment on the current situation, the role of music in it, music therapists’ actions, and reflections for our field.

We Colombians are living times of turmoil. The COVID crisis has taken a toll on our economy. In 2021, the National Department of Statistics (DANE) revealed that the percentage of people living in “monetary poverty” had increased to 42.5% (21 million people in Colombia are living in poverty), and our unemployment rate reached 15.1% in April (with women and youth being the most affected segments of the population). The quality of life and mental health of many people has been affected tremendously in the past 18 months.

A tax reform was presented by the government to congress, causing major distress for people who felt that the reform would further hurt their quality of life, which prompted protests. However, what started as protests against such reform (later withdrawn by the government), kept growing. It soon became evident that this was not just about tax reform. The protests unveiled a much deeper societal problem, one that for years we, as a society, had refuse to really acknowledge! The discomfort was so vast that concerns over COVID moved down in priorities for the people who were taking the streets. Thousands mobilized in protests that have continued for over a month.

As a country, we are now looking directly at the consequences of silencing of voices. The young, who have been historically the hardest hit segment of the population in terms of opportunities, access to education, etc., are the main voices of the protests. Their voices have gone unheard for decades. Their need to express themselves is evident in the streets. The demand of the protesters to be heard is legitimate. As is their right to raise their voices in the streets! And, their demand to be heard!
In Colombia, to engage in protest is a right protected by the constitution, Supreme Court of Justice rulings, and documents by the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos humanos (Interamerican Comisión for Human rights). However, accounts from journalists, participants in the protests, and videos available in social media, speak of an unacceptable excess use of force from the government, counter to national and international commitments.

Adding to the complexity of the situation, at some points during this month-long protest, some people have used blockages as a mechanism of pressure, causing difficulties securing oxygen supply to hospitals (crucial in the COVID crisis), transportation of patients in ambulances, and food and medication supplies in some regions.

There has been an escalation of violence. Lives have been lost. Life, and its protection, should be our common ground!

At the time of writing this commentary, we are currently in a moment of tense calm. Violence has been slowly de-escalating, but there have not been successful dialogues between protesters and the government.

I would like to highlight how important music has been during these moments of crisis, and how music becomes a mechanism for unheard voices to claim, to denounce, to demand to be heard. Music is definitely part of the social protest movement. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been part of our history as a Latinamerican country. In the 1960-1970’s, when some Latinamerican countries were living under dictatorial governments, artists used their voices and platforms to denounce injustice. Many of them were threatened and even had to seek refuge in other countries. Their music was censored. But instead of diminishing the popularity of protest music, the continent saw a strengthening of the Música protesta genre (Protest music or social song). To this day, some of the songs from those years continue to accompany protests and social causes. Throughout the years, music kept its role as a denouncement mechanism, and artists still use their platforms to denounce social injustice. As Robayo (2015) mentioned, the themes in Latinamerican protest music include: representation and social critique, denouncement, complaints, self-recognition of power structures (dominant and domi-ne), conflict, rebellion, freedom, social injustice, displacement, authority abuse, and courage. I would add that recently, themes like racism and feminism have been included in songs within the genre.

Mark Mattern (1998) described the connection between politics and music through the community lens. Music, in this context, is conceived as having a communicative role. He included in his book three forms of what he calls “Concert in action”: confrontational, deliberative and pragmatic (pp. 25). The rise of protest music within the Latinamerican context aligns with the confrontational form, communicating resistance and opposition.

During the recent Colombian protests, this role of music has been clear. People have chanted using everyday objects as if they were as drums and shakers, and they have marched while chanting and moving together. A massive expression through music. You can find many videos on social media of this type of expression.

Also, more often now, musicians trained in the classical tradition have been taking part in the protests. And their platforms and the platforms of the orchestras have been used to impact social causes. They are raising their voices against violence and injustice. I want to highlight this type of manifestation, because previously music in the protests had been considered more an issue of “popular musicians” (meaning: musicians self-made, or trained within the popular music traditions). I would like to present some examples of this in the current protests.

This performance took place in Medellin, where many instrumental musicians played together the song “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido” (United people will never been defeated), a 1975 song that is heard in protests around the continent. In the video, you can see the moment where the crowd shouts the chorus of the song, while the musicians play the rest of it.

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4imww8Ejs20
Another example is the performance of the Himno de la guardia indígena (Hymn of the indigenous guard) played by the Orquesta Filarmónica de Bogotá (Bogotá’s Philharmonic Orchestra) as a tribute to the Indigenous guard.

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsIrR4wZy00

Here you can find the original version (at least one that can be found on YouTube):
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwR6VgQ1mOE

A final example of such involvement by classical musicians involves Medellín’s Philharmonic orchestra. A couple of years ago, the orchestra created the Coro Reconciliación. A choir was formed that included former members of guerilla and paramilitary groups, as well as victims. This was a space to sing together. Here I share their version of Para la Guerra nada (Nothing for war) a song by Marta Gomez. In this version, they also sing with the choir A la Escucha. A choir of Colombian refugees living in Canada.

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKb34myhS30

The community of Colombian music therapists are not unaware of our reality. In light of the social turmoil, the Colombian Music therapy Association released the following communication:

From the ACM, we reject every act of violence that has been committed in the past weeks—during the mobilizations in different regions of the country—and express our concern regarding the violation of the fundamental right of life.... We stand in solidarity with those who are experiencing deep sorrow derived from our country’s current conflict, which has caused mental health issues for Colombians. We have decided to join peace actions—through artistic expressions—offering our voices for singing to life. For a country in the key of peace. ACM (Translation by the author)

Through a public call in their social media, the ACM has invited music therapists to join a day of musicking and reflection named: Colombia in the Key of Peace (Colombia en clave de paz). All professionals can join this meeting to join our voices to protest violence and call for the respect of life.

It is my hope that reading this commentary will prompt a reflection on social injustice, inequality and the consequences of silencing voices. Diversity is rich, and presents alternatives for dialogue and growth. Hopefully, as a global community of music therapists, we embrace diversity, are aware of privileged positions, and strive for the right of every voice to be heard!

As a complement to my commentary, I wanted to include a list of songs from the protest music genre from different countries of the region (see Table 1). This is not a complete list. I’m sure there are songs that were left out. I’m aware of the importance of each song because, as mentioned above, each song gave voice to someone! I don’t include links to each song, as there are many versions to each of them, and the reader may prefer a version with a translation in their language (if it’s available). I would recommend searching in YouTube using the name of the song and the author. Also look for translations of the lyrics in the reader’s native language.

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Table 1
Protest Music

| COUNTRY | NAME OF SONG          | COMPOSER            | TITLE TRANSLATION                  | TOPICS                                                                 |
|---------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ARGENTINA | Si se calla el cantor | Horacio Guarany     | If the Singer is silenced         | Protesting persecution and disappearing practices by the dictatorial government |
| ARGENTINA | Sólo le pido a Dios   | León Gieco           | I just ask from God               | Protesting injustice. Emblematic phrase: I just ask from God that I’m not indifferent to injustice |
| ARGENTINA | Como la cigarrra      | Maria Elena Walsh. Mercedes Sosa's version is recommended | Like the cicada               | Emblematic phrase: how many times they killed me, how many times I died. Nonetheless, I’m here resurrecting. I thank the hand with knife because it killed me badly and I’m still singing |
| ARGENTINA | Todavía cantamos      | Victor Heredia      | We are still singing              | Emblematic phrase: we still sing, we still request, we still dream, we still hope |
| ARGENTINA | Los dinosaurios       | Charly García       | The dinosaurs                     | Denouncing disappearing practices by the government. Emblematic phrase: The Friends from the Barrio may disappear. Those in the newspapers might disappear. But the “dinosaurs” will disappear |
| ARGENTINA | Matador               | Fabulosos Cadillacs | The killer                        | Emblematic: What's that sound, there are bullets, they reached me. Resist Victor Jara. Don't get silenced |
| ARGENTINA | Señor Matanza         | Mano Negra           | Mister killings                   | He decides what goes, says what won’t be, decides who pays, and who shall live, this land and this bar are property of the Señor matanza |
| MÉXICO   | Canción sin miedo     | Vivir Quintana. Recommended version: Vivir Quintana y el palomar | Song without fear              | Feminist hymn. Denouncing rapes. Emblematic: Let the state the sky, the streets shake. Let the judges shake. Today they are taking calm away from women. They planted fear; we grew wings. |
| MÉXICO   | Gimme the power       | Molotov             | Give me the power                 | Protesting corruption and abuse of power. Emblematic phrase: if you give more power to the power, the harder they will come to fuck you. |
| MÉXICO   | Derecho de nacimiento | Natalia Lafourcade  | Birth right                       | Protesting social inequity. Emblematic phrase: It's a birth right, the motor of our movement, because I demand freedom of speech. If I don't ask for it, is because I'm dying |
| CHILE    | El derecho de vivir en paz | Victor Jara     | The right to live in peace        | Is the universal chant, the chain that will make triumph, the right to live in peace |
| CHILE    | El pueblo unido jamás será vencido | Quilapayún | The people united will never be defeated | Song to motivate people to march protesting. Emblematic phrase: The people united, will never be defeated |
| CHILE    | Me gustan los estudiantes | Violeta Parra | I like the students               | Defending the right to protest of students. Emblematic phrase: I like the students who march on the ruins, with raised flags for all the student body |
| CHILE    | El baile de los       | Los Prisioneros     | The dance of                      | Protesting exclusion and privilege. Emblematic phrase: |
| COUNTRY | NAME OF SONG | COMPOSER | TITLE TRANSLATION | TOPICS | EMBLEMATIC PHRASE |
|---------|-------------|----------|----------------|--------|------------------|
| CHILE   | que sobran  | those left aside | Come and join the dance of those left aside. Nobody will miss us; nobody wanted to truly help us. |
| PUERTO RICO | Un violador en tu camino | Las tesis | A rapist on your way | Protesting rape culture. This became a performati ve protest replicated in many languages and countries around the globe. Emblematic phrase: the rapist is you! |
| PUERTO RICO | Latinoamerica | Calle 13 | Latinamerica | Protesting interventionism. Emblematic phrase: you can't buy the wind, you can't buy the sun, you can't buy the rain, you can't buy the heat. You can't buy the clouds, you can't buy the colors, you can't buy my joy, you can't buy my pain. |
| CUBA    | La vida no vale nada | Pablo Milanés | Life has no value | Emblematic phrase: Life has no value when others are killing each other, and I'm still here singing, as if though nothing was going on |
| COLOMBIA | Café y Petróleo | Ana y Jaime | Coffee and oil | Defending country's resources. Emblematic phrase: Your nation is my nation, your problem is my problem, people: your flag is my flag |
| COLOMBIA | Ayer me echaron del pueblo | Jose A Morales | Yesterday, they kicked me out of town | Denouncing abuse of power, social injustice. Emblematic phrase: they kicked me out of town, because I refused to sign, the sentence the mayor gave me, because I hit my boss, when he was disrespectful to my family. |
| COLOMBIA | Hay que sacar al diablo | Beatriz Arellano | We need to get the devil out | Protesting violence. Emblematic phrase: we need to stop the war with song, because only bambuco has permission to make the nation's soul cry |
| COLOMBIA | Para la guerra nada | Marta Gómez | Nothing for war | Protesting violence. This song has a chorus (Nothing for war), and people is invited to composed their own words. |
| COLOMBIA | Somos los prietos | Chocquibtownn | We are the prietos | Vindication of afrocolombians. Emblematic phrase: the rhythm is black. But not everything black is bad, like the TV says. |
| COLOMBIA | Himno de la guardia indígena | Guardia Indígena | Indigenous guard an them | Empowering chant for the members of the guardia indígena. Emblematic phrase: guardia, strength, for my race, for my land |
| COLOMBIA | La rebelión | Joe Arroyo | The rebellion | Speaking of racism in times of colonization. Emblematic phrase: Don't hit my negra (black woman) |
| COLOMBIA | Mujer Negra | La Zea | Black woman | Critique of racism and privilege. When I look in the mirror I don't see just a woman. I see a black woman full of power. My body is not an object of subjection and control, if I don't fight it now, it will let me to extermination. |
| COLOMBIA | No nos van a reprimir | Sarita Aldana | They will not repress us | Protesting repression. They will not repress us. The theater act will be over. I'm telling you upfront. |
| COLOMBIA | Sed | Lucio Feuillet | Thirst | The protests announce that the people are wounded, the media repeat what their "boss" has said. And here... everything is OK? |
| COUNTRY | NAME OF SONG | COMPOSER | TITLE TRANSLATION | TOPICS EMBLEMATIC PHRASE |
|---------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| COLOMBIA | No hay una vida que no nos duela | Adriana Lucía | There is no lost life that does not hurt us | There is not a lost life that does not hurt us. Every sorrow carries sadness. And although luck abandons them, there is no mother who does not cry them. |
| COLOMBIA | Un canto por Colombia | Various artists (Marta Gómez, Adriana Lucía, Victoria Sur, Lucio Feuillet, María Mulata) | A chant for Colombia | Song invoking peace through music. But in this war old as time, songs are born from silence. Voices hug and get together again, singing a chant to the wind. A chant for land, a chant for peace, a chant for life a chant, for the wind. A chant for the young dreaming, the old and the children. |

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