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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity by Paul Austerlitz

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Source: *The World of Music*, 2000, Vol. 42, No. 2, Spirit Practices in a Global Ecumene (2000), pp. 153-156

Published by: VWB - Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41699340>

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**Paul Austerlitz, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, ix + 195 pp., music exx., photographs, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 1-56639-484-8 (paper). ISBN 1-56639-483-X. \$22.95.**

In the Caribbean, music has played a significant role in the process of imagining the nation. Probably since the late-nineteenth century, it has been a key subject in the midst of the discussions and debates around the definition of a national culture, and a matter of deliberation to some of the region's influential intellectuals. However, the last decades have witnessed an important theoretical shift, where music is no longer approached only as an *expression* of a given essence, but as an element that participates in the *construction* of identities. The concern with "authenticity" that characterized many studies of "folk" traditions and "art" music, has given a way to the investigation of expressive culture as a space for the articulation of social relationships. Contemporary research on popular music gives great attention to the ways in which music relates to collective experiences of time and space (Frith 1987, Lipsitz 1994, Quintero 1998). In tune with these trends, Paul Austerlitz sets out to formulate a "stylistic and social history" of *merengue*, "in relation to nationalism, race, migration, social class, commodification, gender, and sexuality," considering this Dominican genre in "its interplay at the national, transnational, and regional levels" (p. xiv).

*Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* is an obligatory item within the still sparse literature on Dominican popular music (see also important writings by Pacini 1995, Brito Ureña 1997, del Castillo 1988, and Duany 1994). In a well written and organized narrative that avoids academic jargon, the book invites all kinds of readers to the world of "euphoric sounds" that initially drew the author to this music. In its first part (chapters 2 to 4), Austerlitz gives a succinct account of *merengue's* history from the mid-nineteenth century, when the first references to a kind of music with this name are found, until the end of Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (1961). Addressing dynamics of "race" and class in Dominican society, the author attempts to explain the process through which a musical expression of the Cibao region became a symbol of national identity. After the end of a thirty-one-year authoritarian and isolationist dictatorship, the country went through drastic economic and social changes. The dramatic rise in foreign investments in the country and an intense migratory wave (particularly to the United States and Puerto Rico) transformed the nation into a transnational community, paving the way for the international boom of *merengue* which is analysed in the second part of the book. Understanding the dynamics of popular culture in global society requires an attentive look at the local level. Austerlitz appropriately ends his book with a chapter that examines the dialectics between local and transnational forms and performing contexts of *merengue* (though a problem with the sequence of notes in chapter six needs correction in a future reprint).

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its analysis of *merengues*'s stylistic continuities and transformations. A jazz and *merengue* saxophonist himself since the 1980s, Austerlitz demonstrates a profound knowledge of how *merengue* "works" musically, and a sharp ear in identifying significant stylistic characteristics and changes. His familiarity with the medium also gives him access to perceptions and value judgments of other musicians, thereby enriching his analysis. Testimonies of composers and band leaders such as Luis Pérez, Johnny Ventura, Wilfrido Vargas, and Juan Luis Guerra, among others, on the ways they creatively incorporate influences from other genres (a process Austerlitz calls "domestication of transnational popular culture") are extremely interesting. This process has been especially marked since the author started carrying out interviews back in the 1980s, when he was working on his Master's thesis, and he is now able to share with the reader an inside perspective on *merengue*'s trajectories throughout the last decades. The text leaves us with the impression that the author's research and knowledge is far greater than what is actually said in the book. While his conciseness is admirable, the transformation of an exhaustive study into a more focused narrative has unfortunately narrowed the scope of the analysis of certain significant issues.

Musicological studies in the Caribbean region have privileged the analysis of ethnic influences in local genres. Particularly in the Hispanic Caribbean, musical expressions that attained a status of national symbols have been characterized as *mestizo* or *hybrid* genres because of their incorporation of traditions of different origin. But there is still much research to be done in order to develop an analysis of the social dynamics of music making and "reception." Austerlitz' attempt to examine why *merengue* has endured as a symbol of Dominican identity is certainly a challenging endeavor, which the book only partially accomplishes, since it seems to lack problematization of some of the issues under consideration. A close examination of Austerlitz' conclusion brings up the points that remain problematic: "Considering the music in local, national, and transnational perspectives, this book argues that Dominicans have used *merengue cibaëño* as a national symbol precisely because its syncretic quality appeals to the prevailing African-derived aesthetic without offending the prevailing Hispanophilism" (p. 149).

The syncretic characteristics of *merengue* are well described in Austerlitz' musical analysis, but a question arises: is this qualification enough to explain its endurance as a national symbol? First of all, one must inquire, is *merengue* the only syncretic musical expression of the Dominican Republic? In the last chapter, Austerlitz himself mentions several regional variants of the *merengue* complex, suggesting that each of them has a local history and a particular way of being syncretic. Why then has the Cibao region's tradition prevailed? In the Introduction the author affirms: "what is more natural than for the urbane, Eurocentric Dominican cultural nationalists to be attracted to the syncretic *merengue* rather than to Afro-Dominican drumming?" (p. 11). This mapping of the Dominican musical universe as an opposition between "syncretic *merengue*" and "Afro-Dominican drumming" seems contradictory with the author's own discussion of regional manifestations, and remains a problematic statement. A more incisive analysis of the Cibao social history would probably help to explain this apparent contradiction. On the other hand, cultural preferences and prejudices have to be explained rather than taken for granted. The use of expressions like a "*natural* preference" or that "the *danza* was of course censured by Eurocentric Cubans" (p. 16, my emphases) leaves untouched the question of how racial prejudice informs cultural discourses and nationalist ideologies.

But Austerlitz is right in observing that *merengue* indeed has prevailed as a national symbol. I would suggest that more than looking at *merengue*'s syncretic essence to explain why it appealed to the nationalist elite and became popular in the whole country, it would be impor-

tant to examine how has *merengue* been able to transform itself and define the parameters of what it means to be a national-popular Dominican music. Austerlitz' observations regarding *merengue*'s stylistic transformations offer a great deal of material within which to explore this question. But this examination would need to go in hand with a deeper historical analysis of Dominican and Caribbean societies. The idea that *merengue*'s success has to do with its appeal to a "prevailing African-derived aesthetic without offending the prevailing Hispanophilism" (p. 149) is a good point of departure to analyze, in musical terms, the multiple "negotiations" that imprint the history of cultural traditions. However, once again, these dichotomized categories should be questioned. Another concept that poses difficulties is that of "Eurocentric Dominicans" or "Eurocentric Caribbeans," this used in reference to the predominantly Hispanic-descended elite. It is true that cultural prejudice based on a racist ideology has been a widespread attitude of the hegemonic classes in the Caribbean, but it seems to me that use of the term "Eurocentric" to define a social class could be misleading.

The interplay between the regional, national, and transnational levels is one of Austerlitz' great contributions to the understanding of *merengue*'s historical continuity and transformations, addressing a fundamental characteristic of Caribbean popular music: that both tradition and innovation are highly valued. The regional and transnational contexts are analyzed here primarily in relation to the issue of national identity. The fact that Dominicans perceive *merengue*'s international success as a triumph of the Dominican Republic (as is grasped from the interviews), does not imply that in a transnational context *merengue* is not participating in the construction of other zones of identity.

This book is evidence that Paul Austerlitz is, without any doubt, one of the most knowledgeable individuals on the subject of *merengue*. He has solid experience as a performer and has engaged in vast research over a long period. In the Preface of his book he praises his "intimacy" with the music but also recognizes the values of being an "outsider" (Austerlitz was born in Finland and raised in New York City) for being able to pose questions from a different perspective than that of cultural "insiders." One of the important contributions of the book is precisely the variety of the numerous insiders' testimonies. As Robert Farris Thompson says in the Foreword of the book, Austerlitz "turns over the microphone." The reader will be delighted with the sounds of all these voices integrated into a coherent historical account. What one could say is missing is a little more counterpoint, a little more dissonance; a critical reflection on these testimonies. Austerlitz also has an experienced voice. He has a riff that we want to go on hearing.

Mareia Quintero Rivera

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**Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. xiv + 246 pp., music exx., appendices, notes, bibliography. ISBN 0-19-511101-X. £13.99 / \$19.95.**

Education has a lot to learn from ethnomusicology. Patricia Shehan Campbell's recent book gives teachers a rare chance to observe musical activities and thinking that they are usually excluded from, offering a close-up view of the school culture and the varied and independent musical behaviours of young children. The book is also a reminder that perhaps ethnomusicology has a little to learn from education too, in that Campbell contributes to a still relatively sparse research area that recognises children in schools as a valid and valuable population to study. The equally important, but sometimes conflicting, research standpoints of the two disciplines are both present in this engaging text; the ethnomusicologist's willingness to stand and take notice of what is really there, and the educator's desire to intervene, to somehow make things better and more reliable. For the most part, Campbell separates these two intentions with admirable clarity, so that the rare moments of crossing boundaries, or purposes, seem acutely uncomfortable, but nevertheless contribute to a book that is accessible and useful for both potential audiences.

*Songs in Their Heads* is organised in a tripartite structure, consisting of observations of children in different musical contexts, interviews with fifteen children from a variety of musical and social backgrounds, and observations and recommendations on the prospects for musical education that emerge from the children's behaviour and ideas. There is thus a systematic refinement of ideas through the book, as Campbell the educator comes increasingly to the fore, offering her ideas for building on the rich musical life that she observes. In the first section, we are back in the playground with the Opies (1993), as the children crowd round their visitor, eager to share their culture and their way of thinking. This was for me the most engaging part of the book, as it gave access to elements of musical behaviour that only a trusted, unobtrusive observer can gain, as the children sang on the school bus, danced as they swept the dining room, and explored musical sources in the toy shop. Then, in the discussions that followed these preliminary visits, Campbell allows the children to talk in ways that reveal the children's