

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.

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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 However, what started as protests against such reform (later withdrawn by the government), kept growing.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 dominee), 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 Medellín, where many instrumental musicians played together the song "El pueblo unido jamás será vencido" (United people will never be 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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About the Author

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Table 1
Protest Music

COUNTRY	NAME OF SONG	COMPOSER	TITLE TRANSLATION	TOPICS EMBLEMATIC PHRASE
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 cigarra	María 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
	que sobran		those left aside	Come and join the dance of those left aside. Nobody will miss us; nobody wanted to truly help us.
CHILE	Un violador en tu camino	Las tesis	A rapist on your way	Protesting rape culture. This became a performative 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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