

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

Andean Music and its Relationship with the Community, Nature, and the Cosmos

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Abstract

The article “Andean music and its relationship with the community, nature, and the cosmos” explores the deep connection between Andean music and the worldview of the peoples who inhabit the Andes mountain range. Using an ethnomusicological and therapeutic approach, it analyzes how Andean music transcends its aesthetic dimension to become a means of spiritual, communal, and healing communication. It highlights its links with natural cycles, agricultural rituals, and collective practices that strengthen identity and social cohesion. The text proposes integrating Andean sounds into contemporary music therapy, recognizing their potential to promote emotional regulation, community belonging, and identity re-signification. It also raises the need for intercultural and decolonial music therapy that values ancestral knowledge and avoids exoticizing or reductionist views. In this sense, Andean music is presented as a therapeutic and cultural resource of enormous relevance, capable of articulating the relationship between the human, the natural, and the cosmic.

Keywords: Andean music; Andean worldview; intercultural music therapy; sound identity; decolonial approach

Editorial Comment

The author, musician, and psychologist from the northern region of Potosí, who lives and works in La Paz, Bolivia, offers us a characterization of the music of the Andes region. Music is present in rituals, in communication with ancestors, in the cycles of nature, and in its capacity for dialogue with other types of music. The notion of sonic identity allows Julio to explore the strong relationship between the Andean soundscape and the personal and cultural identity of those who participate in musical experiences in that context.

Introduction

Andean music is much more than just an art form; it is an essential pillar of the worldview and daily life of the indigenous peoples who inhabit the Andes Mountains. This rich musical tradition extends across countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina, and is deeply intertwined with the ancestral roots of the Quechua, Aymara, and other Andean communities. Authors such as Thomas Turino (2008) point out that Andean music is not only a means of aesthetic expression, but also plays a fundamental role in the social, ritual, and spiritual structure of these communities, acting as a bridge for communication, healing, connection with nature, and transcendence to the cosmos.

The vast richness of Andean music is reflected in the diversity of styles and instruments that compose it, each with its own characteristics and meanings. Stobart (2006) argues that Andean music captures the geography and very essence of the Andes. For his part, Sánchez Huaranga (2018) points out that these instruments, handmade from natural materials such as cane, wood, leather, and bone, are considered sacred in many communities, as they are believed to have the ability to connect human beings with the spirits of nature, ancestors, and cosmic forces.

This beautiful musical expression flourishes and thrives in the Andes region, a vast mountain range that stands as the backbone of South America. Known for its climatic diversity, breathtaking landscapes, and ancestral cultures, this place has witnessed the emergence of a variety of musical styles, each with its own unique characteristics and nuances. Andean music stands out for its emotional and evocative melodies, which are often performed in harmony, reflecting the community spirit and reciprocity so characteristic of Andean cultures. The rhythms range from slow and ceremonial, used in rituals and religious celebrations, to more lively and festive, accompanying dances and popular festivities. In addition, Andean music often includes lyrics in indigenous languages, such as Quechua and Aymara, conveying stories, legends, ancestral teachings, and reflections on life, death, and the universe, but also reflecting deep human feelings such as pain, love, or heartbreak.

The history of this music dates back to pre-Columbian times, with findings of musical instruments and practices at archaeological sites in the region. During the colonial era, it merged with European influences, giving rise to new styles and forms of expression. Turino (2008) points out that, in the 20th century, Andean music experienced a vibrant renaissance, driven by the indigenist movement and the emergence of groups and artists who rescued and revitalized ancestral musical traditions. Today, Andean music remains a living and dynamic force, adapting to modern times without losing its essence and deep connection to the past.

Development

The Andean worldview is a rich and profound belief system that sees music as a sacred language, a way of communicating directly with nature, the cosmos, and the divine. Unlike the Western view, which often sees music as entertainment, in the Andean worldview, music is essential for communication, healing, spiritual connection, and balance between human beings, nature, and the universe. Music is not just something to be heard, it is something to be felt, lived, shared, and experienced in its entirety. Stobart (2006) notes that, in this worldview, nature is seen as a living being, full of intelligence, consciousness, and spirit. Thus, music becomes a means of connecting with nature, listening to its subtle and powerful messages, and honoring its strength and wisdom. The sounds of Andean instruments often mimic the sounds of nature, such as the wind whistling through the mountains, water flowing in rivers, animals singing, and thunder rumbling in the sky. By interpreting these sounds, Andean musicians create an intimate dialogue with nature,

seeking its guidance, protection, and blessing. For example, in some Andean communities, musicians use the quena to imitate the song of the condor, the sacred bird of the Andes. In doing so, they connect with the spirit of the condor, invoking its strength, vision, and ability to rise above problems. In addition, we can observe the ritual of *serenading* the instruments, in which they are taken to a sacred place, such as a waterfall, to receive the melodies and spirit of the water before being played in the community. The melodies and rhythms of Andean music are inspired by natural agricultural cycles, such as the solstice, the equinox, and the seasons, which is also a relevant aspect in pointing out the relationship between Andean music and nature and the cosmos.

Turino (2008) mentions that this worldview also includes the idea of an orderly and hierarchical cosmos, filled with deities, ancestral spirits, and cosmic forces. In this context, music becomes a bridge connecting the cosmos with the earth, allowing humans to establish a link with the divine, receive its guidance, and access its wisdom. Andean rituals and ceremonies often incorporate music, songs, and dances to invoke deities, pay homage to ancestors, and express gratitude for blessings received. During Inti Raymi, the festival of the sun, Andean musicians perform sacred music to honor the sun god and ensure the continuity of life. The rhythms and melodies of this music are designed to connect participants with the energy of the sun, strengthening their vitality and spirit.

Andean music constitutes a soundscape laden with cultural, identity, and community meanings that transcend the aesthetic dimension to become part of the daily, ritual, and productive life of the peoples who practice it. In this sense, its study and application within the field of music therapy allows us to highlight the richness of sound traditions that have historically been relegated in favor of Eurocentric paradigms, while opening up the possibility of generating more contextualized and culturally relevant therapeutic practices.

It is important to note that music in the Andes is characterized by a participatory musicality, oriented toward social interaction rather than aesthetic contemplation. This dimension is paradigmatically manifested in *sikuri* ensembles, where the technique of *arka/ira* (the two parts of the instrument) requires two or more performers to complete the melody together, generating an experience of interdependence and cohesion.

Turino (1989) indicates that, from a therapeutic perspective, this phenomenon is particularly relevant, as it promotes motor and respiratory synchrony, a sense of belonging, and the experience of shared agency, which are essential elements in the process of repairing social bonds and recovering from traumatic experiences. Music in the Andes plays a fundamental role in strengthening social and community ties. By participating in musical activities such as singing, dancing, or playing instruments, people feel more united, share experiences and emotions, and build a sense of belonging and solidarity. Andean music promotes cooperation, reciprocity, mutual respect, and appreciation of diversity, values that are essential in Andean cultures. Likewise, during community celebrations, it brings together people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. By singing and dancing together, they strengthen their social bonds and celebrate their shared culture.

Latin American literature on music therapy has also contributed to understanding how to integrate Andean sounds into clinical practice. Since the 1970s, the Benenzon Model has proposed the notion of *Sound Identity* (ISO) as the core of personal and cultural musical experience (Barcellos, 2001). ISO offers a powerful conceptual tool for recognizing, in Andean musical instruments, resonances of identity that can be mobilized therapeutically in clinical work, either individually or in groups. In line with this, more recent approaches, such as *Community Music Therapy* (Ansdell, 2002; Stige, 2002), insist on the need to open up therapeutic practice to the community and cultural context, which fits in with the participatory and ritual nature of Andean music itself.

Ethnomusicological studies by authors such as Stobart (2006), Romero (2021), and Mendiivil (2016) have shown that Andean music is closely linked to agricultural calendars, festive rituals, and processes of national and ethnic identity construction. This contextual

anchoring is key to avoiding exoticizing or essentialist readings within music therapy. On the contrary, a decolonial approach invites us to co-design interventions with communities and patients, respecting the diversity and dynamism of the “Andean,” which is not reduced to pentatonic scales or a “folkloric” repertoire frozen in time, but rather is dynamic and interactive.

Andean music offers multiple therapeutic resources. First, wind instruments promote respiratory and group regulation, as they require phrasing that synchronizes breathing and rhythm. Second, the call-and-response structures present in Andean music facilitate sound dialogue and turn-taking dynamics, which are useful in group therapy contexts. Third, the articulation of music with ritual and agricultural cycles opens up the possibility of using it as a symbolic container in processes of mourning, life transitions, and community strengthening. Finally, the construction of simple instruments, such as sikus or pinquillos, introduces an occupational and ecological dimension, linking therapeutic practice with the subjects’ relationship to their territory.

In my clinical, pedagogical, and community experience, I have had the opportunity to share this type of music in both Andean communities and more institutionalized settings, and I have observed that it has a particular effect on people. When I include Andean melodies, I notice that participants are not only able to recognize and express deep emotions, but also evoke memories linked to their family and community roots. Andean music offers a set of resources that strengthen both the clinical and community dimensions of music therapy. Its participatory nature, its regulatory potential, and its deep cultural roots allow us to work simultaneously on emotional regulation, group cohesion, and the re-signification of identity. As Romero (2021) and MENDÍVIL (2016) warn, the challenge lies in avoiding simplistic and essentialist views, promoting instead practices that recognize the complexity, historicity, and diversity of the Andean world. For contemporary music therapy, incorporating this knowledge not only means enriching its technical resources, but also moving towards a more inclusive, intercultural, and socially committed practice.

In short, Andean music is an authentic and profound expression of the Andean worldview, reflecting its essential connection with nature, the cosmos, and the divine. By listening to or performing Andean music, people can reconnect with their cultural roots, strengthen their identity, pass on their values to new generations, and preserve an invaluable legacy for the future. Andean music is not just an art form; it is a powerful tool for healing, spiritual connection, and social transformation.

Conclusions

Andean music goes beyond being just an art form; it has become a fundamental pillar in the lives of Andean communities. It reflects their worldview, their intimate connection with nature and the cosmos, and their constant search for health, well-being, and harmony. Over the years, Andean music has evolved and adapted to social and cultural changes, but it has always maintained its essence and value as an invaluable cultural heritage of the Andean peoples.

Although music has universal characteristics, each culture has its own musical identity and a particular vision of what music means to it. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the nature of Andean music when carrying out any type of music therapy intervention with these communities. In this context, music is perceived not only through its sounds, but also in its relationship with the community, nature, and the cosmos. Andean music constitutes a cultural and spiritual heritage that transcends the limits of the merely aesthetic to become part of the daily, ritual, and community life of the peoples who practice it. Its participatory nature, its anchoring in the Andean worldview, and its ability

to articulate links between the human, the natural, and the cosmic make it a therapeutic resource of enormous relevance in the field of music therapy.

Far from being a static repertoire, Andean music is a dynamic and diverse sound system that enables processes of emotional regulation, group cohesion, and identity re-signification. The respiratory synchrony in wind instrument ensembles, the dialogical dimension of call-and-response structures, and the rituality that accompanies its practice offer a set of tools that can be used in both clinical and community contexts.

Likewise, the integration of Andean sound into music therapy implies an ethical and epistemological commitment: recognizing the historicity, complexity, and plurality of the Andean culture, avoiding exoticizing or reductionist views. As various authors warn, moving toward an intercultural and decolonial practice involves not only using instruments or melodies, but also understanding the social, spiritual, and symbolic contexts in which this music is produced and experienced.

In short, the incorporation of Andean music into music therapy practice not only enriches the technical repertoire, but also opens up the possibility of building a more inclusive, rooted, and socially committed music therapy. It is a fertile path for generating interventions that honor ancestral knowledge, strengthen identities, and contribute to individual and collective healing.

Today, Andean music continues to be a source of identity, pride, and resistance for Andean communities, who pass it down from generation to generation as a valuable legacy. It is essential to recognize and value the importance of this music as an essential element for the health and well-being of these communities, and to actively support initiatives that seek to preserve, promote, and disseminate this invaluable cultural heritage, not only for the Andean peoples, but for all of humanity.

About the Author

Julio Mariscal Lima: Musician and psychologist, with postgraduate training in Children's Music Therapy, Gestalt Psychotherapy, Higher Education and Intercultural Systemic Psychotherapy. Educator in violence prevention workshops for children and adolescents in educational units in La Paz and El Alto, as well as teachers, priests, and family mothers. He also carried out group psychotherapeutic and music therapy processes in the treatment of violence, in several NGOs in La Paz and recently with women in situations of seclusion. Furthermore, they are part of original Andean musical communities. He is a founding member of MUSAB (Bolivian Music Therapy Association).

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