Cultural Revolution, the Avant-garde, and Popular Music
Understanding the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC and its Impact
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This chapter considers the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora (GES), a musical collective housed from 1969-1978 within the Cuban film institute known popular by its acronym, the ICAIC, within the context of the larger trajectory of post-revolutionary popular music. In doing so, it challenges earlier studies that have downplayed the popular music profile of the GES, focusing primarily on the musicians’ work composing film scores and brushing past the role of the GES in the development of popular song movements such as the nueva trova. Rather than viewing the GES years as a sort of creative tangent in the personal biographies of the artists involved, my analysis views the GES, its performative practices, and the sounds that it produced as a critical incubator of what would become the sound of post-revolutionary Cuba. Additionally, the experimental collectivist strategies employed by the GES became a lasting model for popular musicians and its impact still seen in the fusion-oriented popular song movement represented in the 1990s and 2000s by collectives such as Habana Abierta and today by Robertoico Carcassés’ collective, Interactivo.

A musical collective founded by ICAIC director Alfredo Guevara and directed by composer and guitarist Leo Brouwer, the GES incorporated musicians who would become some of the Revolution’s most renowned artists, including trovadores Pablo Milanés, Silvio Rodríguez, and Noel Nicola, and jazz musicians Leonardo Acosta and Carlos Averhoff, Brouwer states that rather being fundamentally a film music project, the fundamental mission of the GES was “to transform the repertoire of Cuban popular music to the best of our abilities.”

While some members of the GES, such as composer and guitarist Sergio Vitier, had formal musical training, the majority of the musicians did not, and a key aspect of the project was to provide comprehensive classes on music theory, analysis, and history, taught by Brouwer, Federico Smith, and Juan Elósegui.

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1 ICAIC stands for Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria Cinematográfica. The GES had several waves of personnel and production, with a major flux of personnel and artistic direction taking place during the period 1972-1974. The Grupo de Experimentación Sonora is referred to in the literature by two acronyms, GES and GESI (the “I” for ICAIC). I have chosen to go with GES as it is how the participants themselves have referred to the group.

2 While both Robin Moore’s (2003) and Clara Díaz Pérez’ (2004) work on the GES discusses the collective within the context of the rise of the Nueva Trova movement, both authors treat the GES as providing a sort of a tangential pause in individual artists’ development, viewing the ICAIC as offering as a safe haven for musicians in a difficult time. They do not, however, seriously examine the artistic impact of the GES on popular song as a whole or on the performative model that GES actors introduced and that continues to influence the making of popular song today. Tamara Levitz (2014), too, similarly privileges film music in her analysis. See Robin Moore, “Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 1965-95” Ethnomusicology 47/1 (Winter, 2003): 1-41; Clara Díaz Pérez, Sobre la guitarra la voz: Una historia de la nueva trova cubana (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1994); and Tamara Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution: Cuba’s Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC,” in Pickut, ed., Tomorrow is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 180-210.

3 “[T]ransformar el repertorio de la música popular cubana dentro de nuestras posibilidades.” Jaime Sarusky, Una Leyenda de la Música Cubana: Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2006), 10
The founding of the GES by Guevara in 1969 can only be viewed as a sort of “rescue operation” for musicians disenfranchised by the increasingly conservative politics of Cuba’s state-run cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{4} By the late 1960s, growing institutional control and oversight over artistic expression had begun to create, as Sergio Vitier put it, a state of “creative inertia,”\textsuperscript{5} a situation which the 1968 Congreso Cultural de La Habana, called by the Consejo Nacional de Cultura to address rising cultural tensions, only worsened.\textsuperscript{6} Leo Brouwer describes Guevara’s decisiveness in forming the GES as a largely autonomous group answering only to the ICAIC director as nothing short of an intervention. “The ICAIC waited for the appropriate channels to function, and when they didn’t, the ICAIC acted, in this case, with music.”\textsuperscript{7}

In focusing on the GES as an incubator for popular music, in particular popular music forms such as jazz and nueva trova that were disenfranchised by the state cultural apparatus, I question how the discursive rhetoric of the avant-garde was appropriated by Brouwer and the GES, whose members described themselves as “la vanguardia de la música cubana.”\textsuperscript{8} I suggest that such rhetoric might be as much strategic as descriptive, serving to shield the GES and its musicians from charges that its foreign-inflected music might be tainted with unsavory desviación ideológica, or “ideological drift.”

Part of this study, then, involves considering the rhetoric of avant-gardism and experimentalism in Cuba not within a context of subversion or oppositionality,\textsuperscript{9} but rather within a context in which the avant-garde, championed by official institutions as representing the transformative potential of the Revolution itself, came to serve the status quo. Liliana González Moreno describes all three of Cuba’s main cultural institutions at this time, the ICAIC, the UNEAC (Unión de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos) and the Casa de las Américas, as strong advocates for the avant-garde, and draws attention to the fact that the history of the role, meaning, and political currency of the avant-garde and experimental practices in post-revolutionary Cuba have yet to be closely studied.\textsuperscript{10}

Like the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, the first state-recognized jazz band that had had its objectionable connections with U.S. imperialism and mass mediated popular culture both sanitized and elevated via its redesignation as “modern music” orchestra, the motley crew of trovadores, jazz musicians, and internationalist composers\textsuperscript{11} that made up the GES had much to gain by their rebranding as “experimental.” Using 1\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{4} The early years of the GES coincide with the five year “grey period” in post-revolutionary Cuba known as the “quinquenio gris,” when repressive policies increased and freedom of expression was greatly curtailed. At the time of the founding of the GES, Silvio Rodríguez and Leo Brouwer had both been effectively banned from their jobs at the ICRT, Pablo Milanés had been previously incarcerated and released from a “reeducational” forced labor camp and his and Noel Nicola’s music had come under renewed ideological scrutiny, and the entire nueva trova movement was regarded with increasing suspicion on the part of institutional authorities. See Moore, Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 13-20.

\textsuperscript{5} Sarusky, 24.

\textsuperscript{6} See Brouwer’s discussion of the Congress in Sarusky, 28-29.

\textsuperscript{7} “[E]l ICAIC esperó a que los canales apropiados funcionaran; y como no funcionaron, el ICAIC actúó, en este caso, en la música.” Sarusky, 24.

\textsuperscript{8} González Moreno, Federico Smith, 86, n. 63.

\textsuperscript{9} Characteristics which, Levitz points out, have been fundamental to North American and European understanding of experimental music. Levitz, “Experimental Music,” 184.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. 86, n. 63.

\textsuperscript{11} Brouwer had studied composition at Juliard and at the Hart School, and composer Federico Smith, who Brouwer brought in to teach, was himself from the United States.
person and published interviews as well as contemporary press and criticism, my analysis of the GES and its activities suggests that the actions, motivations, and creations of GES artists vacillated widely in terms of their commitment to any position that might be recognized as experimental or avant-garde. This generic ambiguity is audible as well as discursive and the chapter will use brief musical examples to show how the output of the GES could be read and understood in multiple ways, a polysemy with strategic advantages for the GES’ creative survival.

The aesthetic and ideological contradictions and idiosyncrasies that mark the group, its output, and the relationship of its music to the discourse that surrounds it are certainly inconvenient for any narrative that chooses to view the GES through a singular lens, whether that be that of popular music, protest song, the avant-garde, or experimental music. Tamara Levitz’ recent study is the first to attempt to address these tensions. In it, she places the GES\textsuperscript{12} squarely within the cultural parameters of experimentalism as expressed by Cage and others in the 1960s. At the same time, however, she underscores some of the philosophical, political, and aesthetic differences in the Cuban case.\textsuperscript{13}

Drawing from Benjamin Piekut, Eric Drott and George F. Lewis, she uses the singular circumstances of 1960s Cuba and the GES in particular to call for a wider understanding of the term “experimental,” one which allows for a broader palette of sounds, sounds that in other context might not be considered experimental at all.

I am not particularly interested here in interrogating the experimentalist credentials of the GES and its activities. Indeed, I suspect that preconceived notions regarding “experimentación sonora” may have actually stunted serious examination of the GES and its impact. I find it much more interesting to examine the GES’ discursive positioning impacted not only its ability to survive and make music, but also the ways that that music was heard and understood, and how similar performative practices are understood today.

\textsuperscript{12} She prefers the acronym “GESI.” Both acronyms appear in the literature. I have chosen to go with GES as it is how the participants themselves have referred to the group.

\textsuperscript{13} In particular, she highlights the contradiction between the anti-elitist stance of experimentalists in the United States and the self-proclaimed elitism voiced by Brouwer, who saw himself and the GES as on the vanguard of a cultural movement that would revolutionize Cuban popular culture. Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 184-185.