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The fusions and confusions of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* in jazz: A listener's musings

Antoni Pizà

Foundation for Iberian Music, City University of New York (CUNY)

Abstract: Reflections on *Sketches of Spain* (1960) by Miles Davis and Gil Evans, focusing on their jazz version of Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* (1940). Motivated by Edward Said's and Homi K. Bhabha's writings, the recording is analyzed as a cultural artifact characterized by its "formal instability" and its typological "in-betweenness," rendering it neither classical nor jazz; neither Spanish nor non-Spanish; and neither traditional nor modern, among other dualities. *Sketches* is an artwork that defies categories and inhabits the interstices of cultural expectations.

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Keywords: Joaquín Rodrigo; *Concierto de Aranjuez*; Miles Davis; Gil Evans; *Sketches of Spain*

1. Introduction

Some time ago, while listening to *Sketches of Spain* (1960) and specifically to its first, longest, and possibly most influential track, “Concierto de Aranjuez (Adagio),” I was reminded of the late Edward Said and his famous pronouncement regarding Palestinian writing. “The striking thing about Palestinian prose and prose fiction,” he writes, “is its formal instability” (1986, p. 38). The trope of “formal instability”—understood here, as a certain reluctance to settle in clear-cut frameworks and categorizations—is what defines Miles Davis’s and Gil Evans’s famous collaboration. No doubt, *Sketches* is a polished work, where all musical principles, including form, are cared for in fastidious detail—from the overall structure to the voicings of the harmony, the highly controlled dynamics, the sophisticated and at the same time innovative recording techniques, and so forth. Its success and longevity, however, is not dependent on these quantifiable achievements, but rather on its inconclusive categorization, its hybridity at many different levels. *Sketches* thrives in its “in-betweenness,” its ontological “interstices”, to use Homi K. Bhabha’s terms (1994, p. 1; 1996, pp. 53-60). Its hybridity is not an anomaly, but rather its *raison d’être*.

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2. Neither jazz nor classical. What, then?

Sketches of Spain is sometimes ascribed to *third stream* aesthetics, in other words, a “genre of music located about halfway between jazz and classical music,” as Gunther Schuller, its major proponent, defined it (Schuller, 1986, p. 114). This is especially relevant in the case of “Concierto de Aranjuez (Adagio)”, a track, as is well known, based on the main theme of the Adagio of the famous guitar concerto by Joaquín Rodrigo, *Concierto de Aranjuez* (1940).

Neither jazz nor classical, Evans’s arrangement inhabits a no-man’s land, an unknown crevice in the mesh of cultural expectations. “Like all the Gil Evans collaborations [with Miles Davis],” writes Jeremy Yudkin, *Sketches* “is only partly

successful, for the band plays neither with the precision of a classical orchestra nor with the loose freedom of a jazz band” (Yudkin, 2008, p. 54). Another renowned critic, Martin Williams, although pleased with Davis’s playing, also voices serious doubts about the arrangement, which in his view is “something of a curiosity and a failure, as I think a comparison with any good performance of the movement by a classical guitarist would confirm” (Williams, 1993, p. 204).

This leaves *Sketches* in general and “Concierto” in particular with a genre question mark: is it jazz, classical music, Muzak, “world music” (Harrison, 1997, p. 81) or maybe even flamenco? “In recent years,” writes John Szwed, a Davis biographer, “some have criticized the Davis-Evans collaborations as mood music, easy listening, elevator music, as mid-cult schlock better suited to TV commercials” (Szwed, 2002, p. 213). Confounded about its hybrid status, a British reporter once asked Miles Davis if *Sketches* was “really jazz”, to which he retorted, “I think it is” (Chambers, 1998, p. 25). In reality, however, *Sketches* could not claim to be at home in any musical genre, as even some of the other tracks on the record were dismissed as “bogus flamenco” (Chambers, 1998, p. 12).

Sketches might be part of a new musical genre or a genre in-between—a genre without a monolithic, individual author, among other things, which is a staple of most classical music. In 1961, *Sketches* was awarded a Grammy for a category called “Jazz Composition of More Than Five Minutes Duration.” Is *Sketches* really a “composition” and, if so, who is the composer? “Concierto,” for instance, could be attributed to Rodrigo, Evans or Davis. And the same multi-author responsibility applies to the other tracks. The Grammy in 1961 rewarded mostly longish musical works with complex orchestrations such as the ones by Duke Ellington and Lalo Schiffrin, creations that would fall in the category of *third stream* jazz. Needless to say, “composing” in jazz is a fluid category that often overlaps with improvising and arranging. The fact, though, is that in essence *Sketches* has no compositions, if by composing we mean creating new, absolutely original music. Some sources for *Sketches* are classical, including

Rodrigo's Adagio. The rest are elaborations of folk materials. Neither/nor, we could say. *Sketches* is beyond the traditional Western concept of authorship. In *Sketches* authorship falls in-between and, in the process, creates a contour of formal instability.

3. A guitar concerto without guitars

The instrumental choices of Evans's arrangement of the original *Concierto* also expose some of its taxonomical in-betweenness. Whereas classical compositions, generally speaking, are attached to a very specific sound, many non-classical works are not particular about their timbre and an arranger has an ample margin of freedom. As a "classical" piece, *Concierto de Aranjuez* was orchestrated with skill, its timbre being an essential component of its entity. Oblivious to this fact, in his score, Gil Evans subverts the *Concierto's* original instrumentation. It includes castanets, a too-obvious cultural signifier of Spain that Rodrigo eluded, using indeed no percussion at all. The castanets at the beginning of the track, most likely overdubbed, almost forcefully pasted on the other tracks, one could say, are not metrical; there are no perceptible downbeats or accents as in most Spanish music using them. They are not even meant to sound like castanets. They create, rather, a background, an ambience, a soundtrack, if you will, like raindrops or wind through rustling leaves.

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Miles Davis's memorable solo (on a flugelhorn first and muted trumpet later on), on the other hand, soars to supplant the elaborate guitar solo at the beginning of the movement. A harp aims at imitating the strumming of the guitar. Listeners may wonder, why not use an actual guitar then? It takes a few seconds to realize that the guitar is totally absent in this recording. That Evans had the audacity of eluding the guitar in what would become the most beloved composition of the guitar repertoire is indeed notable. It works, no doubt, because the flugelhorn and trumpet evoke not the guitar of the original *Concierto*, but what seems to have inspired it, the singing, in a very abstract way, of a sort of a neobaroque aria, perhaps a far-flung, unconscious reference to the *sarabande*, an idealized baroque dance-movement evocative of the

ancient Spanish *zarabanda*. According to Javier Suárez-Pajares, Rodrigo was at the time fascinated with Stravinsky's innovative ways of incorporating baroque and neobaroque music in his compositions, and the Adagio is Rodrigo's reading of this trend (personal communication September 12, 2019).

4. National fusions and geographical confusions

The miracle of Evans and Davis's "Concierto de Aranjuez (Adagio)"—its paradoxical success—is the jumbling of diverse cultural and geographical national misattributions. For listeners it is a blessing in disguise. The album's title, its jacket, the musical sources, and the arrangement (including the aforementioned castanets, among many other instruments not present in the original) are all "Spanish." Gil Evans, moreover, often thought of and referred to it as a "Spanish album" (Stein Crease, 2001, p. 206). Davis also believed (mistakenly, as it turned out) that the recording included music from Peru. "We got a folklore record of Peruvian Indian music..." Miles Davis stated in his autobiography (Davis, 1989, p. 241); and later he mentioned that during the recording sessions of *Sketches* a trumpet player was "trying to play this Mexican melody" (Davis, 1989, p. 242). A Brazilian track was also to be included, but eventually was left out of the final record.

A clarification of those statements seems necessary. The "Brazilian" track was "Song of our Country" and was based on *Bachianas Brasileiras, No. 2* ("Aria: Canto da Nossa Terra") by Heitor Villa-Lobos. The tune, though, was not included in the original 1960 album. It would actually be incorporated in later re-issues of the recording starting with *Directions* (1981), Miles Davis's double compilation album. It was reissued subsequently many more times. What Davis calls "Peruvian Indian music," on the other hand, was the track titled "The Pan Piper" (side 2 – track 1). Some scholars and writers, including two Gil Evans biographers (Hicock, 2002, p. 108; Stein Crease, 2001, p. 209), have mistakenly attributed its source, perhaps following Davis's autobiography, to a Peruvian melody sung by street vendors in the Andes. Nat Hentoff,

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more perceptive and better informed—he was present during some of the recording sessions—had already observed in the original liner notes that the track uses “a folk melody [that] Gil heard on an ethnic recording.” The source, identified and analyzed in detail by Iván Iglesias (Iglesias, 2010, pp. 312-333), is “Alborada de Vigo,” a folk tune included in Alan Lomax’s field recordings of Galicia (Spain) issued in 1956 as part of *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*.

Nor is there any “Mexican melody” in *Sketches*. Davis might be confusing it with a folk melody allegedly compiled by Carlos Chávez and used in Davis’s and Evans’s “Blues for Pablo” from the album *Miles Ahead* (1957). In the autobiography’s discussion of the recording sessions of *Sketches*, Davis’s allusion to a “Mexican melody” can only be described as a cultural and geographical Freudian slip, muddling the categories of “Spanish” and “Mexican.” In any case, the main source for “Blues for Pablo,” named after a fallen hero of the Spanish war of 1936-39, is “Por la noche canta el cuco” (Iglesias, 2010, p. 306) from *The Three-Cornered Hat* (*El sombrero de tres picos*, 1919) by Manuel de Falla. “Blues for Pablo” is sometimes also misattributed (Hicock, 2002, p. 110) to the score *Love, the Magician* (*El amor brujo*, 1915) by the same composer. Meanwhile, confusing as it is, the source for “Will o’ the Wisp” (*Sketches*, side 1 – track 2), a track that immediately follows “Concierto,” is indeed based on *Love, the Magician*.

There is more to this confusing musical world tour. Miles Davis felt a connection with the “blackness” of Spain as conveyed, he thought, by the sources of the music for *Sketches*. He regarded the “Saeta” (*Sketches*, side 2 – track 2) as a difficult piece to perform because of “all those Arabic musical scales up in there [the *saeta*], black African scales that you can hear. And they modulate and bend and twist and snake and move around. It is like being in Morocco” (Davis, 1989, p. 242). Regarding “Solea” (*Sketches*, side 2 – track 3), he considered it “close to the American black feeling in the blues. It comes from Andalusia, so it’s African-based” (*ibid.*). Needless

to say, Arabian origins are not in Africa but in Asia, which is almost the only world region that Davis does not mention.

5. From Festive Spain to Mystical Spain: Being “drained of all emotion”

Rodrigo’s *Adagio*, although an original composition, has been linked to the *saeta* (Wade, 2006, p. 273), the mournful unaccompanied song performed often from a balcony during the Holy Week processions in Andalusia. This is not the case since, as mentioned earlier, the movement seems to hark back to the baroque period via Stravinsky. Either way, whether its source is the *saeta* or baroque music, interestingly enough, here, to the cliché of festive Spain, another trope is added: that of mystical Spain.

Mysticism, thus, is what in the end connects “*Concierto*” and *Concierto* at a deeper level. Rodrigo owed some of his thinking about what is a valid representation of Spanish music to the French Hispanist Henri Collet. The author of several studies about Spanish polyphony, Collet had been Rodrigo’s friend and protector in Paris, where he introduced him to Paul Dukas, Rodrigo’s main teacher in France. Collet was also one of the main promoters of the idea of a “mystical” Spain, a country which in his view was better represented by the spirit of Castile than that of Andalusia (Llano, 2012, pp. 65-77). Rodrigo himself expressed his preference for Manuel de Falla’s “Castilian” works, such as *Master Peter’s Puppet Show (El retablo de Maese Pedro)*, 1923) to those articulating *andalucismo*, such as *The Three-Cornered Hat* (Moreda Rodríguez, 2017, p. 52).

One can easily imagine a 1960s fan, grabbing a *Sketches* LP at a record store and reading Nat Hentoff’s earnest liner notes: “A brooding, dramatic Spanish sound and feeling pervades all the works on this record.” It does, actually. Miles Davis, to be sure, also felt it: “After we finished working on *Sketches of Spain*, I didn’t have *nothing* inside me. I was drained of all emotion...” (Hentoff, 1960, p. 244). According to

Hentoff's liner notes, again, after concluding the recording sessions for *Sketches*, Davis said to Evans: "Our next record date will be silence" (Hentoff, 1960, n. p.).

6. The Way to Reach the Moderns

"The way to reach the moderns," a 1920s pamphlet inserted in the daily *New York American*, assured its readers that by advertising in its publication they would reach a hip set of jazz-age customers. From James P. Johnson's 1923 stride tune "You Got to Be Modernistic" onwards, jazz had promoted itself explicitly as a beacon of modernity and urban stylishness. Rodrigo's *Concierto*, on the other hand, seems to espouse traditional, earthy, rural values. *Sketches* needed to negotiate both sets of values. Some of this was to be accomplished through the album's jacket art.

Enter Mark Rothko and abstract expressionism. The album's jacket, the first physical element a potential buyer would encounter in the sixties and a crucial element for its promotion, includes a matador-like Miles Davis with a trumpet (as a sword's avatar) over a background of three stripes. This iconography brings to mind the Spanish flag but executed in the abstract expressionist style of Mark Rothko's signature "multiforms" or stripe paintings, still trendy in the 1960s. The art, in any case, seems to represent two different, apparently opposed, cultural spaces: on the one hand, national identity and tradition (matador, the flag, etc.), on the other, modernity (abstract expressionism). Film director Pedro Almodóvar in the soundtracks of *High Heels* (*Tacones lejanos*, 1991) and *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995), by the way, also plays on this duality by using music from *Sketches* ("Saeta" and "Solea"), signaling at national roots, but with a powerful modern twist. Spanish, yes; but also current and hip—a way to reach the moderns. The brilliance of *Sketches* relies on this swinging duality, thus, the fluidity between roots and modern hipness, and the formal instability it generates.

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7. A Catalan Detour

The story of how *Sketches* came to be has been told numerous times. In essence, Davis had developed a love for Spanish music thanks to actress Beverly Bentley, with whom he had a relationship. She had spent time in Spain shooting a film and she even attended a birthday party there for Hemingway, an unabated fan of the country. In 1958, she brought back to the US a recorded anthology of flamenco guitar as a gift for Davis (Szwed, 2002, p. 207). In 1959, Davis also attended a show in New York of the *Ballet español* directed by the Mexican dancer Roberto Iglesias. On his way home, he stopped at a store and bought “every flamenco record in the place” (Szwed, 2002, p. 207).

A few months after, in 1959, while visiting Los Angeles, and with an already whetted appetite for all things Spanish, Davis heard Rodrigo’s *Concierto* for the first time. His friend and fellow musician Joe Mondragon played a record of the *Concierto* for him, probably in a version by guitar virtuoso Narciso Yepes (Iglesias, 2010, p. 309), and Davis was immediately sold on it. “Goddamm, these melody lines are strong. I knew right there that I had to record it, because they just stayed in my head” (Davis, 1989, p. 241). And record it they did, except that Columbia Records, being Columbia, failed to ask for Rodrigo’s authorization.

The composer learned about *Sketches* through Tete Montoliu, the eminent blind Catalan jazz pianist. In 1960 Rodrigo, his daughter Cecilia, and her future husband, Agustín León Ara, went to hear Montoliu at a jazz club in Madrid. The jazzman, who claimed to have been the first in Spain to own a copy of *Sketches* (Jurado, 1992, p. 18), gave the Rodrigo family an enthusiastic report of the album. Rodrigo, though, became understandably irate with the American label for having used his music without permission (Moyano Zamora, 1999, p. 123). Rodrigo next asked Montoliu to come to his house to play the album for him. He did, and in addition to feeling bothered by the illegal use of his music, in Montoliu’s telling, Rodrigo did not

like the jazz arrangement he heard (Jurado, 1998, p. 18). Eventually Rodrigo changed his mind and came to accept the subsequent jazz recordings of his music in part because the legal terms of use were resolved (Ediciones Joaquín Rodrigo now owns the Gil Evans arrangement), but also in part because these versions, far from obliterating the original guitar concerto, have helped disseminate it.

Montoliu remembers that his acquaintance with Rodrigo dated back to his first piano lessons with Petri Palou. The latter was a close friend of composer Frederic Mompou, Rodrigo's old acquaintance. According to Montoliu's reminiscences in his autobiography, Mompou asked Rodrigo's advice regarding whether Palou should take this young gifted blind student (Montoliu). Rodrigo responded that blindness should make no difference; only the student's talent and potential. "Teaching a blind student", Montoliu remembers Rodrigo reportedly saying to Mompou, "is neither more nor less difficult [than sighted students], it only requires the will to do it" (Jurado, 1998, p. 50).¹

Despite Montoliu's acknowledged debt to Rodrigo for having indirectly recommended him to Petri Palou, thus jumpstarting his musical education and helping him overcome some of the hurdles of his disability, he always felt ambivalent towards the *Concierto* in particular and to Rodrigo's music in general. He nevertheless recorded the Adagio's tune for a Japanese album, but only reluctantly. "My *Aranjuez...* in the Japanese recording", states Montoliu, "has nothing to do with the original, it is a bit of melody and after I improvise a blues. They imposed it on me and I didn't know what to do with this" (Jurado, 1992, p. 18).²

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8. Appropriating the appropriation

Montoliu's lack of enthusiasm for Rodrigo's Adagio and its jazz sequels was an exception to how most Spanish jazz musicians and audiences felt. Briefly, from the

¹ Author's translation.

² Author's translation.

very beginning, they embraced “Concierto” as a genuine musical expression of “Spanish jazz.” It would appear that *Sketches*, given its cultural fusions and confusions, gave an Orientalist and foreign view of Spain. Maybe it did, but even since the issuing of the album, Spanish audiences and musicians have appropriated it as their own, no matter how foreign and exotic its tropes were. In short, they appropriated the appropriation.

Following the enormous triumph of *Sketches*, and especially of “Concierto,” the Adagio’s main theme has been performed and recorded with great success by dozens of jazz musicians including Don Hill, Chet Baker, Al Jarreau, Bobby McFerrin, and Chick Corea. Corea’s tune “Spain,” inspired by the Davis and Evans collaboration, has in fact become a cultural identifier of “Spanish jazz.” Musicians, scholars, and audiences even consider it one of the foundational stones of “flamenco jazz,” one of Spain’s own brands of jazz (Manuel, 2016, p. 33; Zagalaz, 2012, pp. 33-54).

“Authentic” Spanish jazz, thus, is, in the end, the USA rendering of “Spanishness” through the work of Davis, Evans, and Corea. Needless to say, authenticity is a myth (Llano, 2010, pp. 1-15). To a certain extent, Spanish jazz musicians and audiences now see themselves through the work of foreign artists, like early-twentieth century Spanish composers adopted French models of Spanishness (Llano, 2010, pp. 1-15). To go back to Almodóvar for a second, the fact that he uses tracks from *Sketches* also implies that he, a Spaniard, feels comfortable with foreign tropes about Spain (Iglesias, 2010, p. 332).

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9. A Coda: Incommensurability

As the cliché goes about all great art, *Sketches* in the end defies all categories. The album is successful not despite its resistance to definition, but because of its taxonomical fluidity, its formal instability, its in-betweenness. Hybridity, of course, is the essence of all creativity in the end and *Sketches* displays this idea fully.

Creolization is always the source of creative work, the location of culture and art. Terms such as “mongrelization, bastardization, corruption” and many other “terms of incommensurability,” in John Szwed’s words, need to be seen in a positive light as much as those of “borrowing, influence [...], montage, fusion, and collage” (Szwed, 2011: 20). *Sketches* falls in between all categories: what is its genre? What is its national identity for a “Spanish album”? Why is the guitar avoided in a guitar composition? And then, Peruvian, Mexican, Brazilian, Arab, Moroccan, African, and black identities are collapsed, fused and confused for artistic purpose—or even for promotional ends. A matador presented as a Rothko image; abstract expressionism used to evoke bullfights. It is in part improvised, but at the same time carefully scored and recorded with, at the time, innovative techniques such as overdubbing. Who is the author of “Concierto”? Rodrigo? Miles Davis? Gil Evans? Mongrelized, bastardized, *Sketches* is not pure or authentic; but no one can say it is inauthentic. It is based on cultural and musical appropriations, but Spaniards themselves have adopted it as a model to be followed. In the end, *Sketches* is incommensurable art.

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