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Bolivia's 'jungle Baroque' music sees revival

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The interior of the church of the Jesuit Missions in Concepción

Father Piotr Nawrot's face glows as he examines a carefully restored fragment of the score from a rare Baroque mass. The fragile scrap had been hidden from the developed world for more than two centuries, exposed to the elements in the steamy, insect-infested jungle of eastern Bolivia.

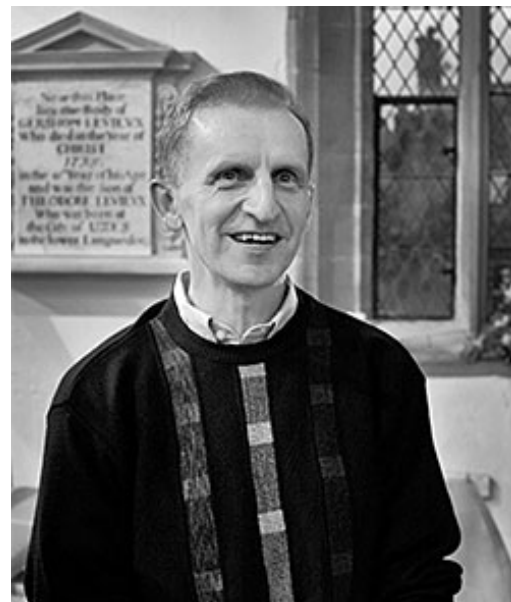
"It was totally accidental that the music was found," says the 60-year-old Polish missionary. The manuscripts were recovered thanks to a drive in the 1980s to restore a group of Jesuit mission churches, stunning examples of the blending of Christian architecture and indigenous traditions declared a Unesco world heritage site in 1990.

A similar fusion in the music from the missions is almost more remarkable. A distinguished musicologist, Father Nawrot has dedicated his life to painstakingly reconstructing the unique

collection of more than 10,000 pages of music, many of them torn, stained, warped and gnawed by bugs. Many more were simply lost.

The rediscovery cleared the way for a cultural revival that has thrust Bolivia's "jungle Baroque" on to the international music scene. Every two years, for a fortnight in April, 50 or more ensembles of local and international musicians gather to play the music in at least 160 concerts held in the mission churches dotted among the rolling hills of the Chiquitanía region. In this lush and exuberant landscape the Baroque aesthetic could hardly be more appropriate.

The area remains remote. To reach the furthest missions requires a day's drive, much of it on dirt roads, from the provincial capital of Santa Cruz. But the International Festival of American Renaissance and Baroque Music, first held in 1996, now draws more than 50,000 concert-goers. To the great pride of locals, it is breathing new life into a rich tradition in Bolivia. It began when a handful of Jesuit priests, who used music as a tool for evangelisation, discovered the musical talent of the Chiquitano people towards the end of the 17th century.



Father Piotr Nawrot, above, is restoring 10,000 pages of Bolivian Baroque music, something with which local people's identity is bound up

Expelled from South America by Spain in 1767, in fewer than eight decades the Jesuits had succeeded in instilling a love of Baroque music among the locals. They taught them to make and play instruments, and even to compose, leading some to write lyrics in their own language. The native population maintained these traditions until well into the 20th century.

Ashley Solomon is a British musician whose Florilegium ensemble in 2005 made the first recording of the music in one of the mission churches where it was originally played. Solomon was deeply moved by the reaction when his group played an anonymous concerto from the 1740s at the festival 10 years ago. "When we played the concerto, a lot of the indigenous people sang along to the melody, which they knew as it is used in their [religious] services. It is remarkable that the archive music is still alive in the communities," he says.

There were challenges to that survival. The Bolivian government sent troops to suppress a group of defiant native people who refused to work on plantations during the rubber boom at the turn of the 20th century, forcing them to flee the jungle town of Trinidad. According to local lore, the only possessions they took with them were the music scores and their violins.



Music schools across the region are teaching Bolivian Baroque

Although the music they learned from the Jesuits survived, it became increasingly rudimentary. According to Father Nawrot, it is evident from studying the archives that, by the 1930s and 1940s, a polyphonic mass would be played on just one rustic violin accompanying one voice. He says that, for the locals, the purity of the music was less important than keeping tradition alive.

When Father Nawrot in the 1990s began to reunite the manuscripts which were spread across different mission communities throughout the region, one group of elders gave him “a lesson that no philosopher could ever have given”. “After three hours of discussing my motives for wanting access to the music, they said, ‘If this music disappears, we will all disappear.’ For them this music is not only about harmony and melody, but their cultural and spiritual identity,” he says.



Practicing before a concert

By the late 20th century, the music was little known outside these isolated communities. But thanks to the music festival, which is organised by the Pro Art and Culture Association (APAC), that is no longer the case. The APAC-funded Arakaendar choir, which brings local and international musicians together, has introduced Bolivian Baroque to some of the most prestigious concert halls in Europe. APAC has set up schools across the region in order to build up a local talent pool that can interpret the music alongside the international professionals that participate in the festival. More than 3,000 students in the area now attend about 30 music schools, which are modelled on the internationally renowned “El Sistema” set up in Venezuela by José Antonio Abreu, a Venezuelan musician, economist and politician.

“Since the first music festival began, we have been recovering our music and our culture,” says Ronald Chinchi, 28, a music teacher in San Ignacio de Velasco, the largest of the mission towns. “Now, in all the towns, there are music schools and the people are beginning to value their culture. It is growing all the time.”

All the children want to be part of an orchestra or choir, which some locals say is almost like being selected for the national football team.

“We bring the music to life, so that it does not just exist on paper,” says Alejandro Abapucu, a 25-year-old music teacher in Concepción who brims with pride for his pupils.

“The music forms a part of our identity. It may have come from

Europe originally, but we have made it our own,” says David Mollinedo, the mayor of Concepción, where the archives are kept. Now politicians from outside the area once evangelised by the Jesuits want to make the Baroque music their own too. That is the case in San Julián, whose population consists mainly of recently arrived immigrants from the impoverished Bolivian highlands. The town’s mayor has threatened to set up road blocks if it is not allowed to participate in next year’s festival.

Despite APAC’s success, and backing from organisations such as the Prince Claus Fund of the Netherlands and the UK’s Royal College of Music, it remains a huge challenge for a non-profit organisation with limited resources.

Without the full support of a national government whose anti-colonialist rhetoric sits awkwardly with the origins of the music, it is no mean feat to put on a festival that brings hundreds of musicians from more than 20 countries to a far-flung corner of South America.

“There is so much work to be done that we are seeking international financing, not just so that we can keep



A painting shows the native music and dances of the Guarayos people

implementing new programmes, but to maintain the ones we have, and so that the mission communities themselves can eventually take the reins of this project,” says Sarah Mansilla, a writer who has recently taken over as president of APAC.



The Jesuit missions of Chiquitos, where the music was first played, are a Unesco world heritage site

That is not to mention the fact that little more than a tenth of the archives has so far been edited, even though Father Nawrot has already published 36 volumes of music, large chunks of which he had to compose himself as pages were missing. Four more volumes will be presented at the next festival in April 2016.

If this music disappears, we will all disappear

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“I am not only interested in transcribing and understanding the music, but also in providing new music for the festival so it can be claimed every time that there will be music that has never been heard before, and, just as important, for this music to be interpreted by Bolivians,” says Father Nawrot, who is the festival’s artistic director. “There is so much music in the archives that it will be impossible to hear it all in my lifetime.”

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