

Enrico Chapela



Enrico Chapela photo © Bernd Uhlig

The noise of the world – and the silence after

A portrait of the Mexican composer Enrico Chapela
by Jürgen Otten

Like many other words, syncopation has its etymological origins in the Greek language, formed from the words *syn* (together) and *koptein* (beat). While the term defines a temporary period of unconsciousness in medicine and signifies the omission of an unstressed medial vowel between two consonants in linguistics, syncopation in music has come to be used as a very pointed form of rhythmic interleaving. A note that is expected to come next as part of the natural flow is either withheld or anticipated. Either way, we hear a rhythmic dislocation.

Latin-American composers have always made ample use of syncopation. However, it is not the mere effect they are after. It is part of their conception of music. And so it comes as no surprise that syncopation plays an important part in Enrico Chapela's oeuvre. None of his works, different though they may be in terms of music, semantics or their architecture, do without syncopation as a means to define or at least emphasize their style. This points towards a further hallmark of Chapela's music: He is fond of asynchronicity, non-simultaneity; the idea of resistance.

It was not until ten years ago that the artist, who was born in Mexico City in 1974, began composing. Following courses at the Centro de Investigación de la Música in his hometown, he undertook further studies in Paris, where he received significant impulses from Horacio Vaggione and José Manuel López López. A closer look at his extremely rapid development within this fairly short time period reveals two things: firstly, his extraordinary output, and secondly, linked to this output, a stupendous increase in the complexity of his scores.

Enrico Chapela started life as a guitarist. This is reflected in compositions such as *Melate Binarío* for acoustic guitar, or *Crucigramma* for string quartet and guitar quartet. The year 2003 saw the premiere of Chapela's first large-scale work, the symphonic poem *inguesu*, a work which is compelling not only on account of its artistry but also in its formal and tonal brilliance. Amazingly, the music is based on a football game. Not just any game, though. For *inguesu* was commissioned by the Carlos Chavez symphony orchestra, an orchestra whose name pays homage to Mexico's most prominent composer, whose musical thinking had been a notable influence on Chapela. In order to write the ultimate national musical

drama, as he himself confessed, Chapela decided to set Mexico's heroic and historic victory over Brazil's dream team at the 1999 Confederations Cup in Mexico City to music.

With its remarkably short duration of nine minutes, *inguesu* is typical of Chapela's aesthetics: reminiscent of Webern in its condensation but totally different in its tonal character. The music is rigorously pointed, a true tonal drama that is a perfect reflection of the character of an exciting football game. The suspense Chapela creates is electrifying; it gradually takes on a sense of nervous neuroticism, soon becoming virtually intolerable and finally turning into an explosion of fortississimo, a moment that has a redemptive quality. In its percussive energy (Chapela uses kettledrums and four sets of percussion instruments), this work (as well as some others) reminds us of Stravinsky's Parisian ballets – *Sacre*, *Petrushka* and *the Firebird*. In Chapela's music, however, this energy is linked with motives taken from Mexican and Brazilian folk music, as well as football chants familiar to every Mexican child.

The degree to which this music is marked by refined (poly)rhythmic structures sets it apart from folkloristic (and thus potentially affirmative) music. Chapela, as becomes obvious, is a master of dramaturgy. A good description of this opalescent, kaleidoscopic symphonic poem is what Adorno once wrote about Beethoven's late works: that the process of reduction is immanent in the music. In fact, this is true of all of Chapela's music. Its material is no longer extensively explored and developed but is presented in condensed form.

The resulting atmospheric density in Chapela's compositions is further enhanced by a process of crystallization. Not unlike North-American minimal music, Chapela uses very few (fixed) motives as patterns that become players in a game. Again and again these motives recur in the musical sphere, forming a framework that holds it together. It would be wrong, however, to describe these motives as leitmotifs as employed in late Romanticism, or even in a Wagnerian sense, since they are characterized by the rhythmic spirit of contemporary modernism rather than by a melodious potential for illusion.

The Mexican composer's perspective goes beyond the limits of what is considered serious music. With its rhythmic interlocking and cross-fading, elements that are immanent to Chapela's style, a work such as *Irrational Music* has a visible archaic and vitalistic quality. Equally distinctive, however, especially in the highly expressive (and at times highly aggressive) suite *La nato es neta* for rock trio and acoustic quintet, are the influences of an aesthetics epitomized by, amongst others, the American experimentalist John Zorn. Another aspect evident in Chapela's music – both in *Irrational music* and in *S.O.S.* for chamber ensemble, written in 2005 – is a tendency towards clustering structures made up of glissandos and multiphonics that open up like an expander and then contract again but at the same time are marked by a process of dialogue. The finesse d'esprit is achieved in the listener's perception: a closer look at the score reveals that what appears to be a clichéd expression of chaos, indifferent in its use of sound, is in fact rigorously based on the principle of canonic imitation. As with all precisely organized music, accurate, both affective and analytical listening for structure is to be recommended.

In Chapela's music, you can never be sure that things will not take surprising turns. Although they seem at first to disturb the organics of the music, a detailed analysis shows that they are precisely calculated and follow a dramaturgical logic. In the work S.O.S. mentioned above, the musical development is interrupted several times. Suddenly, the tonal hardness that pervaded the music is challenged by a melancholy melos that appears like an antiphon of sensibility. The combination of those traditionally divergent patterns of sound is a deliberate device chosen by Chapela. His intention is to set both the noise of the world (likely to be drowned out regularly by the daily swell of noise in his hometown of Mexico City) and the silence before and after to music, hoping to grasp what is in between. The idea of a 'body of sound' takes on an immediate, palpable meaning in his works. For those bodies of sound vibrate so strongly that you cannot resist their fascination.