Ecuadorian Grooves:
Innovating music heritage

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"Innovating folk music enriches not only yours, but all of your compatriots’ hearts"

-Diablo Kiteño

1. Introduction

The Ecuadorian music industry is in its most important takeoff. After several years of being influenced by other international genres, Ecuadorian music has begun taking local identity and meticulous music production into account. The new search in Ecuadorian music has aimed towards quality and an evident music identity. Covering these needs has created a lot of opportunities to compose original themes taking advantage of emerging technologies. In addition, Ecuadorian music possesses extremely rich and diverse genres, incorporating uncountable resources (instruments, tempos, song structures, etc.) that can be used to produce contemporary compositions and rescue such valuable patrimony.

_Ecuadorian Grooves_ was born in the Spring of 2014. Its main goal was redefining and innovating Ecuadorian music by rescuing traditional rhythms and music styles and fusing them with contemporary music genres, thereby creating new sounds that will attract a young audience as well as future generations.

The main objective of this culminating experience was to produce an EP called _ALMA_ (that means, _soul_), comprised of two original songs, written using traditional Ecuadorian rhythms, and two modern arrangements of folk songs, with redefined contemporary music elements, including hybrid composition and innovative technology.

The second objective was to produce a live performance focusing on the interaction between Ableton Live and a live ensemble, creating unique compositions that combined the organic sound of the musicians on stage with the new electronic sound design.
2. Description of the Culminating Experience Project

The two original songs were composed in a traditional method, using piano and basic recordings, and then transferred to detailed modern composition methods using Ableton Live to transcribe the melodies, extract basic rhythms and create the overall sound design. The first song called Tacita de té was inspired on the Albazo music style, popular on the Andean part of Ecuador. New arrangements were incorporated using Ableton’s Drum Rack with previous recorded samples to create all the rhythm section, sound design through Z3TA+2 to create the main melody and the bass line, and a Novation Ultranova Synth to create the ambience sound and harmony. Then all of these elements were taken to Pro Tools to combine them with live tracking of acoustic guitars, percussion, piano, a brass section and vocals, working with a retro sound style.

The second original song called El Manglar was inspired on the Marimba Esmeraldeña music style, from the province of Esmeraldas, located at the North Pacific shore of Ecuador. This genre is different from the others, having being used in Afro Ecuadorian traditional dance culture. This song uses marimba and vocals as the main elements together with an electronic composition made with Ableton. The sound design and vocoders were created with a Novation Ultranova Synth using innovative techniques learned in sound design class; live tracking for drums, congas and electric guitar; and the incorporation of live improvisation sections and attractive vocal arrangements.

The folk songs chosen to be rearranged come from one of the most influential music style in the South American region, the Pasillo. The songs El Alma en los Labios and Sombras are very popular in the Ecuadorian musical culture. Innovative arrangements were created for the songs considering the original melodies and harmonies, and following the same method as with the original compositions. An important part of the new arrangements were re-harmonizing the songs and the use the main melodies as the bass line, to be able to create new melodies for vocals and ambience elements. The
sound design and live tracking represented an important aspect in order to develop an original composition style and overall sound for the EP.

To accomplish the second objective, a concert was held on June 26th at “Berklee Valencia: Un Lago de Conciertos” concert series. Taking into account that it is a popular stage to show emerging music to a very varied audience several points needed to be revised: a manageable production, with easy setup and teardown while keeping the overall sound quality needed for the live performance. Almost all the musicians that participated on the recordings performed at the concert, obtaining a positive audience response and at the same time, making the public release of the EP and the website www.ecuadoriangrooves.com. This website is used as the main tool to release the music and all the info and media about the project.

The following musicians and artists collaborated on the project Ecuadorian Grooves:

Juan Fernando Cifuentes M. (Quito, Ecuador) - Composer, producer, vocals, synths and programming
Juan Posso (Quito, Ecuador) - Drums
Juan Sebastián Laverde (Bogotá, Colombia) - Percussion
Daniel Marín (Tenerife, Spain) - Marimba
David Villarreal (Quito, Ecuador) - Electric Guitar
Lili del Sol Atehortua (Cali, Colombia) - Vocals, VJ
Invited Artists:
Kristina Bijelic (Toronto, Canada) - Vocals
David Ríos Muñoz (San Juan, Puerto Rico) - Acoustic Guitar
Freddy Gonzalez (USA) - Trombone
Emanuelle Contis (Italy) - Tenor Sax
Timotej Kotnik (Slovenia) - Trumpet
Recording Engineer:
Robert Cooper (Menlo Park, USA)

In the concert:
David Acosta (Quito, Ecuador) - Bass
Gonzalo Eyzaguirre (Santiago, Chile) - Percussion
Robert Cooper (USA) - Trumpet
Michael Deacon (Australia) - Tenor Sax
Kyle Bagley (USA) - Trombone

3. Innovative Aspects of the Work

The main musical innovation is based on taking rhythmical and harmonic features of Ecuadorian traditional genres like *Marimba Esmeraldeña*, *Albazo* and *Pasillo*; and combining them with contemporary genres like *EDM*, *Funk* and *Alternative Rock* through using electronic music composing tools, unique sound design, and diverse arrangements.

In order to achieve the innovative composition goals, a vital stage of the project relied on the use of the following equipment:

- A Novation Ultranova, analog synthesizer & vocoder, to create the main sound design.

- Ableton Live, in order to compose and arrange the songs using third party virtual instruments as: Z3TA+2, Massive, Konakt, FM8, Arturia Mini Moog; as well as the mixing of all the tracks.

- Pro Tools, in order to create all the tracking sessions, mixing and mastering.

The live performance intended to demonstrate the innovative performance where Ableton Live session would play together with a live ensemble and including a live VJ on stage. The following technology gear to control and perform was used on stage:
A Novation Launchpad S: To launch scenes during the live performance and control main effects as reverb and delay for the Ableton track mix.

A Novation Launch Control: To launch, control and manipulate visuals on ARENA for the VJ, creating a live video mix during the show, giving freer structures to the visuals.

A Novation Ultranova Analog Synth: To use the vocoder and play the keys of the analog synths during the performance.

4. New Skills Acquired

To achieve all the objectives considered for the project, I feel my musicianship as well as my producer abilities were improved both on their own as well as combined. I would underline the acquisition of the following new skills:

4.1 Composing and arranging: In order to compose innovative original pieces taking into account the proposed concept, I had to develop specialized songwriting skills. This led to the creation of a special workflow that started by composing with traditional methods with piano and then transferring the resultant outcome to the Ableton Live environment, where I would proceed to use electronic composing techniques, thinking about the form of the song and the musical structures for each element. The last step of this process was to create arrangements for the acoustic tracking that best suited the sound design created: considering the textures, ambience and overall mixing for each track. Only by following acquired steps apprehended in several classes during both semesters could I maintain the main musical goal: the combination of traditional style and electronic elements.

4.2 Live performance: Given that I learned how to use Ableton Live at the beginning of the program and that it was my first time using technology with musicians in a live performance; I developed a considerable amount of skills to create accurate
arrangements in the Electronic Production & Live Performance class. During the creation of the different arrangements for the live performance I improved my director skills, stage presence and singing skills, including the usage of vocoders and performance with analog synths and controllers.

4.3 **Music Production:** In the MTI Seminar and Recording and Mixing classes, the most important music production skills that I developed through this year have been: to keep everything as simple as possible and to always think about what music needs in the final product, to follow the overall aesthetics and artistic concept and to follow the use of the rule of three, (that consists on focusing only on three elements at a time, to maintain momentum, emotion and groove during the song.)

4.4 **Video Production:** This was a really singular and relevant skill I obtained while at Berklee. Nowadays, the audiovisual and multimedia world are the instigators of all the marketing and promoting aspects of the music industry. This skills were very useful for the creation of all the video footage, a mini documentary, a promo video and a music video for Ecuadorian Grooves. The acquisition of this skill was truly important so as be an efficient part of the industry in the future.

4.5 **Project Management:** My managing skills, while developing the CE throughout the year, have evolved in a great way. Organizing all the different requirements of the project between rehearsals, production and classwork, required effective time management.

5. **Challenges, both anticipated and unexpected**

The first challenge that I want to emphasize and that I anticipated, is that the Ecuadorian rhythms I chose for writing my music use a 6/8 time signature in common
with some variations: a 3/8 time signature for “Albazo” and a 2/4 time signature for “Bomba Esmeraldeña”. These polyrhythm features, combined with the 4/4 time signature used by the contemporary genres I wanted to fuse them with, made having a natural rhythm and groove very difficult to achieve.

To overcome this challenge I had to develop the special workflow for the composition of the songs, as described previously. This process was very time consuming, given that I started to create ideas months before the Master Program started. This was an unexpected challenge, since I didn’t know how the program would develop.

Once in the process, another challenge was to use the Ableton Live compositions without having enough knowledge of the tool. The only way to overcome that was composing in Ableton Live and practicing piano on a daily basis until I had strong melody and harmony creation skills that I could use with the new workflow.

On the first rehearsals the biggest challenge I had to deal with, was to make the band groove with the unnatural electronic environment. I had to write very clear charts for all the arrangements for every musician and direct the band while performing. That was a hard task for me to achieve, but I managed it thanks to the rehearsals, advice from professors and concerts.

Finally, the last challenge was to work with the mix between the electronic environment and the acoustic instruments, tracking and developing reliable production and arrangement decisions to make the compositions work. The most reliable decision to overcome this was to choose experienced musicians to have the best takes during tracking. The research and listening of music references like “Bajofondo”, “Alex Alvear”, “Daft Punk”, “Bonobo”, and several other EDM producers, made a great difference to get an interesting work on the mix.

During the whole year all the main goals have been achieved and the project has developed its unique sound. With the meticulous feedback from the advisors throughout the prototyping sessions during MTI Seminar classes, many aspects became clearer
and I was able to reach the essence of my work: producing new music. This wouldn't have been possible without all the challenges I had to overcome and all the new skills I acquired during the MTI experience.

6. Future Ramifications and/or plans for the WORK

The main plans for the future of the project are the following:

The release of an LP album with ten songs, planned for the winter of 2016, following the same concept and including a live performance with visuals and traditional dancing on stage. With this in mind, the project will pursue the opportunity to organize a national and/or regional tour through the main Pacific Andean countries, performing with the original musicians that began the project.

Also, the project will have a website that will become the main medium to follow the development, news, concert dates, etc., and will have an interactive visual game to promote the music and concept.

After being in touch and working with musicians and producers from around the world, another important goal for the future will be having international collaborations while promoting the album and the live show; bearing in mind that Ecuador needs cultural projects to promote tourism and an external investment of innovative ideas.
7. Conclusion

The proposed goals were not easy to achieve. Nevertheless, building up every new song for the EP and creating a live performance through the academic year, strengthened the most important objective of my CE: **to rescue and innovate Ecuadorian music, creating a valuable sense of music identity.** At the same time, this will contribute to export new Ecuadorian music to participate in the international music industry.

The main contribution to the profession that *Ecuadorian Grooves* has to offer is being the pioneer to new compositional techniques and, at the same time, creating a new space for innovative music using the same features.

This year at Berklee Valencia, the experience of being exposed and challenged to create with limited tools in the unlimited world that technology has to offer nowadays, is invaluable compared to the theoretical knowledge. Every creative process was taken to its limit to acquire exceptional professional skills and hence becoming a pathfinder of innovative ideas and a designer of the music of the future.

The breakthrough of the Ecuadorian music started many years ago when elderly musicians played live under the star filled Ecuadorian skies, and it keeps maturing with every musical spark of human talent combined with technology and respectful tradition.
8. References


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