

Chapareke Hidrocálido. From ethnography to art:

A collaborative work with Guggenheim Aguascalientes Museum¹

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Before serendipity

A brief description of the departing point.

*Onorúame gave the Rarámuris the task of taking care
of world balances. The Chapareke is part of these
tools to keep that harmony.*

Guadalupe Estrada Cancio

Rarámuri Chapareke preserver

Chapareke or Chapahuela in Rarámuri means: “The key of God’s house”.

Chapareke could be materially seen as a musical instrument mostly used by the indigenous people of the north region of México, the Rarámuri or Taramara peoples.

Its organological description, however it is still not quite stable. On the few writings about it, its definition varies from “musical arc” to “mouth arc”² For instance; a published glossary of instruments defines it briefly as a sitar³.

¹ Guggenheim Aguascalientes has also been the matrix artwork which has made us create a lot of collaborative art pieces. <http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com>

The Chapareke is a hollow rod or a stick, made out of quite wood, the stem of the flower from the maguey plant (*Agave fourcroydes*). Three metal strings are usually attached from one extreme to another with small sticks as tuning pegs.

Its origins and age are equally obscure. Although a variety of musical arcs can be found mostly from the north of México through Latin America, it is played in a manner related to a Jew's Arp or African Ngongo,.

Traditional sound production technique could be divided in two simultaneous actions. The first consists of plucking the strings with the right index finger while the left hand holds it in a horizontal position at the level of the face, pointing it to the left side of the interpreter. The second action occurs inside the mouth. It acts as a resonance cavity, filtering the harmonic spectrum while moving the tongue and the oral muscles for changing the size of the inner acoustic space.

Besides the specific technique, its stability resides too on the fact that Chapareke has its own rich cosmology and cultural meaning. It is embedded in an ancestral system of metaphysical beliefs and culture practices, which determine it both as a divine gift and as a power tool to keep the balance of the universe.

It is also inscribed in a particular crisis environment, not only because of the systematic marginalization of the indigenous people in México but also because of the

² Civallero, Edgardo, 2014. *Arcos musicales de América del Sur*, at: https://www.academia.edu/10414073/Arcos_musicales_de_América_del_Sur

³ Rozemblum, Jorge. 2011, *Glosario de instrumentos musicales*. Ed Akal, Spain. pp..

almost nonexistent interest in Chapareke inside their communities⁴. This is a particularly striking element in relation to its cosmogony, Onorúame, the benevolent god, is sad because nobody plays *Chapahueta*⁵ and this is the reason the world for Rarámuris is filled with difficulties.

The Chapareke exists in a kind of cultural crack or fissure out of which an art can be made, in other words, this is the ambiguous state of affairs where art can arise in.

After Serendipity

The purpose of this collaborative work is not to trace the Chapareke's anatomy, sound or manner of performance around the world to find a complete or perhaps endless genealogy. Nor is it to begin an ethnographic exercise that could reify the Chapareke granting its value only within the academe. Nor is it an attempt to locate its birth in time outside its own mystical context.

Instead, one of the purposes, in an ethnological thinking, is to find historic, geographic and mythological traces that could lead us to a build our own relation to the Rarámuris Chapareke through a complex art practice we call Chapareke Hidrocálido. Therefore through this problematizing, to answer (in an artistic intervention of an ethnomusicology) some of the questions arising from the two Chapareke situations, in a

⁴ After the documentary *Chapareke: La llave de la casa de dios* by Ángel Estrada, the Rarámuri culture was promoted by the state, but as it was not unexpected, these efforts ended with the electoral weather. The resource is not available online but as the Guggenheim Aguascalientes we screened it in the Punto Ciego Festival and you can ask the author for it to see it. Teaser: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_2Jb_vPbUg

⁵ Another name Don Guadalupe Estrada gives to the Chapareke.

way that enables an empowering culture appropriation and a proactive sociopolitical criticism exercise through the sharing of cosmologies and through the construction of art processes (as it is explained later).

Serendipity

In September 2014 a colleague, Roland López, found by mistake a description that became the trigger for a new collaborative work. As part of a bigger project called Guggenheim Aguascalientes he was looking for the way people used to talk in Aguascalientes about 100 years ago and on a short narrative story by the writer Jesús Fructuoso López, he read an intriguing musical instrument description:

Alguno de aquellos campesinos traía consigo una caña, colocada una cuerda en los dos extremos; con un pulgar de la mano derecha la hería, y puesta en la boca la hacía vibrar, produciendo sonidos cadenciosos que modulaba con el aliento de los labios; los dedos de la mano izquierda tocaban la cuerda para amortiguar o producir distintas notas⁶.

The differences made by the author in relation with the sonority of European classic musical tradition, the description's poetic ambiguity and the way he explained it's

⁶ "One of those peasant brought with them a stick, with a string through each ends; plucked with the right thumb and situated on the mouth, he can made it vibrate, producing cadenced sounds with were modulate with the lips breathe; the left hand fingers played the string to cushion or produce different tones." López, Fructuoso, *Un paseo campestre*, chapter III, on Giacinti, Alicia. *Jesús F. López: Un escritor Olvidado* – Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2011, Méx. At: <http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/unpaseocampestre.php>

belonging to the nature soundscape, were more than an incentive to start a quest in the construction of this unknown instrument.

[...]fácil para construirlo, limitado en sus notas[...]. En un salon donde el piano reproduce las concepciones de Bellini o las melodías de Schubert, poca sonoridad produciría el intrumento de una sola cuerda; pero en el campo, [...]se transforman en melódicos sus acentos; como los tonos de la Naturaleza, [...]la soledad tiene su voz sonora,[...]que hiere las fibras del sentimiento, produciendo la inspiración⁷.

For us it was as much as an exercise of naïve conformation of an ancestral sound as a conscious act to reconstruct the past in an artistic exercise of criticism, since the narrative was the same in which this big metal foundry, Gran Fundición Central Mexicana, was recently working in Aguascalientes city, founded by Solomon Guggenheim; a foundry which left a lot of toxic waste polluting the city since then, in several ways.⁸

At the beginning we made a lot of prototypes without achieving any successful results, until we came across a youtube video⁹: *Chapareke: La llave de la casa de Dios* (Chapareke: The key of God's house) by Ángel Estrada¹⁰ in which the Rarámuri Antonio Camarillo Bautista appeared playing the Chapareke.

⁷ "[...]easy to make, pitch limited[...]. In a hall where the piano plays Bellini compositions, or Schubert's melodies, very few sonority could be produced by this one stringed instrument; but in the countryside, [...]his accents become melodic ; as the nature tones, [...]solitude has its own sound voice, [---]which hurts the feelings and produces the inspiration. *Ibid.*

⁸ This toxic waste has been used in the urbanization of the city, from avenues to houses.

⁹ *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.*

This opened a variety of paths to follow and some strategies slowly fell into place.

We knew now how to make a functional Chapareke so we started to become aware of the materials around us and opened our eyes for possibilities.

To have this attitude took us to recognize a potential situation to make a Chapareke: an extension of an avenue was being built in the city. Under the slogan “progress for all” the government was cutting many old trees with no promise of planting new ones (as we had seen according to its past actions and as we testified after). Furthermore these avenues are built from the same toxic waste left by Solomon Guggenheim’s foundry.

One of the fallen trees was displaying all its very enormous roots. We went there to cut one of the roots and we made a Chapareke.

Of course this took some time to figure out the right construction for each part, then finding the right strings and the adequate material for the tuning pegs, with only the video as a reference. It was a youtube-based archeological reconstruction, but this strategy allowed us to shape the specificity of the instrument, along with writing its own history and building a bridge between mythologies of both Chaparekes.

The heart

A particular identity constructed through art, was taking shape as Chapareke Hidrocálido. In other words, our environment gave us a social context where the instrument could be gestated with all the art's capacity to build meaning. Our damaged environment gave us a physical and social context where the instrument could gestate, imbued with all of art's capacity to make meaning. Made from a root from a dead tree cut to make 'progress' out of pollution, our Chapareke was working from the inner earth to the air and eventually disappearing to the sky (god's house) by means of sound.

Given the facts, we decided to take the responsibility to see the Chapareke Hidrocálido as a given key to us for articulating a paradigm where a power object built from recognizing its insertion in social reality, could serve as a point of resistance. Rereading the Rarámuri's myth, Chapareke Hidrocálido resulted in a specific version of the Rarámuri's Chapareke, with a dialogue between the different understandings of balancing the energies of the world.

We really are looking forward to apply the notion of the "God's house key" in a constructive approach. I.e. the Chapareke Hidrocálido is a tool for being able to write another history, another culture linked with the use of sound as an empowering act.

First approaches.

Once the instrument was done we started to work with it. In the first piece we worked, the Chapareke Hidrocálido was inserted in a very forced way¹¹, although the historic relations were there, the instrument was not triggering directly what we found in it. I was just an accompanying music. Anyway it was a fruitful situation we had to solve later.

But what became apparent at the time was the necessity to solve more technical problems of the instrument. As the event was in an open space we had to think about amplification. We were interested in the filtering action of the mouth but amplifying this always ended up with the inherent amplification of the plucked strings. The nature of the Chapareke helped us to see the situation as an inseparable part of the instrument. At the end we attached a b-5 Behringer condenser microphone with a lot of danger to produce feedback.

Another job was deciding whether to specify sound production techniques or not, and if so, how would this be notated? It was a very engaging activity for me, and the exercise seemed to be in conflict with the social embeddedness the Chapareke Hidrocálido. So that was another problematic path to take. Although I had written some sketches for that piece¹², a more complex solution was about to come.

¹¹ <https://vimeo.com/107000844>

¹² *Op. Cit.*

Growing branch

I started to approach the instrument simply as a sounding object freed of any social context or physical environment. I developed lots of what we can name “extended techniques”, preparing the instrument and activating its body with different materials and tools – a bow or a long screw for instance. Taking the instrument to a place where I could start from scratch and to see it as an object, as a sounding device, allowed other elements to arise naturally. In this case the use of the voice appeared as an organic component of the performance. The investigation became a new independent piece, still linked to a body of work¹³. The work has had numerous outputs since then.

The music I wrote concerned recognizing the two important sound processes that were involved in playing the device, the mouth and on the other hand, the strings. Then we worked to become fully aware of the different ways these actions could be produced, altered, expanded, and changed over time. So I decided to write in three staves, indicating more the gesture than the produced sound, one to the actions that happen on the strings, and the other two for a divided behavior of mouth – the proximity from mouth toward the instrument and the size of the oral cavity. Dividing the interpreter actions allows to think on independent parameters and to combine them to obtain another result. Of course one more staff is also added when the voice is needed. As time is written traditionally in the horizontal axis, precise rhythm notations could be achieved on each parameter¹⁴.

¹³ <https://soundcloud.com/omar-fraire/sinergia-serendipia>

¹⁴ http://www.guggenheimaguascalientes.com/chaparekehidrocalido_2_esto.php

However, instead of walking far from the instrument, the instrument's identity was also growing. The composition of this contemporary music work was an act of awareness about the present capacities of the Chapareke Hidrocálido as an instrument for contemporary music, with all the historic dialogue that this may have. Again the social context was being part of the cultural constitution of the instrument – that is to say seeing the Chapareke as a piece not isolated from its cultural complexities.

Another Relations

In the mean time, we were also concerned to meet the author of the documentary *Chapareke: La llave de la casa de Dios*, to know more about *Rarámuri*'s culture. It was not difficult to find him; we came across a common friend in an exhibition about *Guggenheim Aguascalientes* where *Chapareke Hidrocálido* was an important element of it. So we contacted him to present his documentary in a festival I was organizing as a curator, in which one of the works was a new performance piece for *Chapareke Hidrocálido*, a piece where other elements start to appear, and a piece that took us to yet another level an relation with this work.

Ritual

In the frame of the *Punto Ciego* festival, we were preparing a different piece with the instrument. In this case we did it with more people involved. Working with the

Chapareke Hidrocálido had showed us another inherent aspect of it, the latent displacement of boundaries, or even the blurring of them.

Soon we noticed the obvious gesture and movements embedded in the playing technique, and we came up with the idea of incorporated movement in the performance. Soil, an element always present in the back of our minds, and of course in the fabrication of the instrument, came into play at this point. So that Rolando had some soil on a table to work with these relations. We played the instruments on it and we saw how the table was naturally amplifying the sound and also how the instrument left its trace on it, as we were moving while playing.

Something was opening up to our perception: the presence and influence of the human body. One of our co-workers in the festival and in the *Guggenheim Aguascalientes* Museum, Pilar Ramos, assumed this element as a part of a multiplicity that could be developed in a sort of unfolded space from this phenomenon:

The output was intriguing. The performance ended up as a ritual where three of us were playing the instrument over the table full of soil and a naked body was moving over rocks of toxic waste¹⁵, leaving traces in her skin¹⁶. The interactions were multiple. Not only at the artistic level but also in the realm of the *Rarámuris* cosmology. After two rehearsals and one presentation we felt touched in an indescribable manner. We like to

¹⁵ This rocks are part of the legacy of Mr. Guggenheim, and belong to the Guggenheim Aguascalientes collection: <http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/coleccion.php>

¹⁶ *Op. Cit.*

think of this as an energetic situation in which a link with the indigenous heritage acts as a spiritual fact.

Pilar afterwards explained the event beautifully: “Who knows what threads we are pulling”¹⁷.

Chapareke Hidrocálido the short documentary

This project became one of the interests for a film young student in Aguascalientes, Víctor Góngora, who came to me with the initial aim to make a documentary about sound art in Aguascalientes. Basically he wanted to speak about *Punto Ciego*, a festival I was developing since about three years. To help him to find his own definition of sound art, we invited him to one of the rehearsal of the recent *Chapareke Hidrocálido* project.

At the end he got interested in making a *Chapareke Hidrocálido's*¹⁸ documentary, which has been projected as a part of the student's work in the University's film department.

¹⁷ http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/chaparekehidrocalido_2_proceso.php

¹⁸ <https://youtu.be/G6cwEYXRqVA>

Today

The last concert we did, was in one of the smelting furnace. It was a closing performance to *Punto Ciego* festival, because of my moving to Wesleyan University.

Now we face what we call the third stage of the *Chapareke Hidrocálido's* research, where we are finding instruments that suggest that the *Chapareke* had in fact been in Aguascalientes and that an indigenous nomad community in Aguascalientes had used it.

At a forgotten museum from one of the city's town, are stored some instruments presumably belonging to the *Huachichiles*, a culture belonging to the *Chichimecas*. These instruments look like the *Chapareke*, they are musical arcs, and the difference is they do have a resonance elementt made from a dry big pumpkin.

Now we have a probable link to this whole indigenous culture and probably more work to think about.

One of the things we can see now, as part of the *Chapareke's* condition is the fact that it has been moving around some Mexican territories. So we think the logical task for a new work with our instrument is to find a way it travels.

The *Chapareke Hidrocálido* will travel soon to Wesleyan University.