



Camille Claudel's 'The Waltz'. Photo: Wikipedia

THE TIMELESS WALTZ

From Europe to Latin America

I wonder what a Bavarian farmer from the Middle Ages would feel hearing his waltzes accompanied by a Peruvian 'cajón'. Would it seem more or less familiar than the sublimed waltz from the Viennese salons of the nineteenth century?

That basic turning in triple time from the Bavarian highlanders, that simple peasant dance that has fascinated the Western world from the seventeenth century to today, has had as long a life as contributions that have enriched and molded it over time.

In dancing, the waltz has a different air than most dances: It has the illusion of weightlessness, a grace gained in reaching the city salons. The accent on the first beat makes it appear that the couple pauses, holds for a moment, to then float on the remaining two beats while turning and turning, flowing around the room. In its village beginnings the triple time was strongly marked, almost rudely.

In Vienna the waltz became the paradigm of class and elegance after winning the battle from the moralists, accustomed as they were to the *minuet*, who considered it to be an unworthy and indecent dance. It was danced at a faster pace and it became a habit to not play it strictly to the beat but advancing the second beat a bit so that there was a bit more space between it and the third: the weightlessness of the Viennese waltz.

The charm of the waltz did not go unnoticed by the academic composers and made its entry into the symphonic universe, in the opera of the eighteenth century and since then almost every European composer has composed waltzes or has used elements of the waltz in his compositions. From Chopin to Hindemith. Waltz pervaded ballet, chamber music and the repertoire of solo instruments, especially the piano.

In the nineteenth century it swung round to the Americas for the first time and hasn't stopped spinning since. In every region of the continent the waltz has been permeated by local elements and been transformed along the way. As if in turning it picked up and kept for itself new, revitalizing influences. The waltz can be found in the Venezuelan *loropo* and the *pasillo* from

Ecuador. In the Colombian *pasillo* and *bambuco* you also find the waltz. The Argentine *bailecito* has something of the waltz. There is a Mexican waltz and a waltz *criollo* in Argentina. The Cuban waltz, the Peruvian waltz and in Chile, the waltz *chilote*. In Venezuela hundreds of written typical waltzes have been preserved.

Perhaps the most common transformative element in the Latin American waltzes is the ingenious African rhythmic element. As if waiting out the three long beats was boring or bland, the restlessness and playfulness of the black rhythmicity resulted in the introduction of new beats between the three slow counts of the traditional waltz; a very specific rhythmic combination was created that is experienced as the superposition of two different measures. The result is the same waltz sounding in triple and double time, gaining in vitality and charm ... and always sweet, always sensual and romantic.

The waltz is sung in the Americas. And it is heard in concert halls. And it is played with violin, mandolin and is accompanied by the *cuatro* and guitar in Venezuela. And it is fused with jazz and accompanied by the *cajón* in Peru. Mariachis play it in Mexico and their marimbas tinkle it. In Curacao and Aruba it is performed with the piano, the *cuatro*, the bass and the *wiri*. The waltz is composed for simple amusement and in more elaborate form to meditate on, and it is listened to as art, on the piano, on the guitar. And it is sounded by trio with piano, the string quartet, the symphony orchestra.

In Latin America the waltz continues to assimilate new harmonies, new forms and new instrumental combinations in the most natural way, as if it had been created for eternity. Infinite genre incorporating diversity to regenerate over time.

I wonder what we would feel today in listening to a primitive Tyrolean waltz from the Middle Ages. Would we be ennobled by its lost simplicity.