



Tonana*

Song in First People's Languages, Beyond Stereotypes¹

There are many ways of getting to know a country, and in my case, music is what has let me dive into diverse, thrilling territories. I am a singer who has constructed her voice with the pulse of Mexico, perceptible through its sounds, its instruments, its rhythms, its ancestral languages, and its poetry. I am interested in the songs that speak of landscapes, the people, the world views, involving the essence of the world of feelings, more than logical explanations; the ones that deal with the mystery transmitted day-to-day through rituals since ancient times: a murmur, a song to our animals, to a sick heart, or in the face of an imminent farewell.

My passion has been to put poetry to music or sing what others sing, to delve into their hearts with my voice.

Singing unveils my inner world. The very fact of sharing it is, perhaps, one of the most beautiful offerings that can be made. Composing has also been another important

activity to satisfy my need to communicate, something I always seek, because I think that we are children of our time, and it is fundamental to transmit it and preserve it.

The musical voyage that I have built demonstrates the eclecticism of this earth that trapped me, thanks, in great part, to musicologist César Tort, who taught me the languages of the indigenous peoples through their songs, in the classrooms of Mexico City's National Conservatory of Music, when I was nine years old. Those words have turned into an itinerary that reveals the cultural diversity, not only of Mexico, but of many other countries.

Another of my delights has been the re-creation of the paths of musical expression enriched with multiple possibilities of sounds from today's world. That is how I have been able to bring together elements from Mexico's legendary indigenous cultural heritage and Western genres, which have contributed to the construction of my country's music. I have done that by singing in different languages: Tzotzil, Papotec, Náhuatl, and Totonac.

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Music is one of the most powerful roads on which to enjoy this voyage of sound nourished by our ancestral history, but also by the transformations down through the years.

I would like to underline that my repertoire in indigenous languages has given me great freedom in several senses, more than songs written in Spanish: it invites me to imagine more deeply and be more precise when I sing them, because a language that is not understood by most people forces the instrumental musical language and the singer's performance to be richer and more transparent.

I have had the good fortune to work with a talented group of musicians, to whom I owe to a great extent the success of this very special effort. We have achieved almost complete freedom in creation, interpretation, and execution, without a care for the norms that apparently should be followed in certain genres. So, transgressing has been a pleasure.

Recently I was reading writer Miguel León-Portilla, and he talked about the future of the indigenous languages in the third millennium, amidst the increasingly intense processes of globalization. He said that the health of a language is directly related not only to the number of people who keep it alive, but also to its usefulness as an instrument for communication in the face of another language spoken by the majority with which it has to co-exist.²

And perhaps it is in this context of languages-made-minority in which song, mainly that based on poetry, finds its *raison d'être*, and so must be disseminated, offered to everyone, making it difficult for these languages to be forgotten, since he/she who loses words remains orphaned forever.

If we accept that some languages will not survive, music will have to be the most unsettling vehicle for somehow enjoying and preserving them. That is why this artistic production must be fostered and disseminated as a support for identity and joy in favor of cultural diversity.

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We must be realistic about what we expect and what we want to remain beyond the "official version." Creators' participation in this effort will have to be adventurous, looking to create a break, with innovative proposals. They will have to make contributions that are consistent with personal and community realities, with talent. This production will have to be disseminated through all means,

even the institutions that promote art in general, in order to show and grow the multi-cultural mosaic that is Mexico, where we can all look at each other and co-exist.

The inclusion of these languages in the national and universal artistic melting pot is a commitment that has not been completely achieved. It has only been a few years now that people have looked to this heritage; what is still lacking is the integration of all the ingredients of these cultures in a single receptacle, making the pieces fit together naturally, and not giving unsolicited explanations. But if we do not change our idea about this linguistic heritage, it will be very difficult to achieve a positive result in the short or medium term.

Why Do You Sing in Indigenous Languages?

This is a question I'm always asked when I perform, perhaps because I was born in Mexico City and I don't look like the stereotypical Mexican woman. It took me a long time to find the right answer; now I simply respond, "Because I'm Mexican."

My aim as a singer has not been to recover the languages of our ancestors, but to build bridges, to create together, to spread the ancient word of those sweet languages that are also ours, to make inroads in their dissemination with novel rhythms proposing other connections. Visualizing how art can dream new soundscapes, without either clichés or stereotypes, is perhaps the way to reconcile what in other arenas seems impossible.

Life has given me the gift of the chance to sing and record with a group of Seri fisher folk, a first people from the state of Sonora, called Hamac Caziim.³ These musicians mix hard rock with their own rhythms, their world view, and their language. We have spent love-inspiring time together playing through the sounds and bringing our artistic worlds closer together.

I have composed music inspired in the poetry of Tzotzil women, who for 500 years have communicated those words inherited and written in the beautiful book *Conjuros y ebriedades* (Incantations and Inebriations).⁴ Later, I invited the great Tzotzil poet Alberto Gómez Pérez to work with me. Alberto had to face the challenge of composing new texts for music that was already written, since I was not given permission to commercialize his original works. Together we played Asturian bagpipes, musicalizing

with a rhythmic mantra on an acoustic guitar a poem that is a Tzotzil lullabye, "*Vayan olol vayan*" (Sleep, Child, Sleep).⁵

Imagining the texts musically is fascinating, and along those same lines, I have worked with other musicians, for example, Sk'anel Jo', who uses one of his traditions by playing pots to ask for rain and for the crop not to dry out. We made a mixture of old and modern (electronic) sounds to evoke those moments.

For my album *Xquenda* (1996), we reworked songs from the Isthmus of Oaxaca, often forgotten, that invited us to think about, for example, death. To deal with this inevitable farewell, we resorted to an arpeggio of a Peruvian guitar, played by Ángel Chacón, using as a counterpoint the rhythmic *ayoyote* or Aztec jingles of producer and percussionist Rafael González, evoking the pulse of life.



Pepe Mata

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Piti Campo

I could give many more examples, like my version of *La Llorona* (The Wailing Woman) in Zapotec, recorded with the mestizo guitar, also played by Chacón, or sung with Djely Tapa, a singer from Mali, or with the sound artist Alyosha Barreiro, with the Iranian singer Kabeh Parmas, or the Haitians Manoel Anglade and Sylvie Henri.

Art, and particularly the lyricism of these songs, allow for this playful spirit. Alberto Gómez Pérez, the aforementioned Tzotzil poet, says that these peoples are tired of being anthropology museum pieces. And I agree with him that we have to be the children of our era, leaving behind the stereotypes that have been so predominant, and dare to go beyond the prejudices limiting us.

Discovering this and taking the freedom to soar has been wonderful for me and those who accompany me. I feel that art and music are all about that, even if the purists, who we will never please, are still out there.

Galvanizing and inspiring indigenous creators and interpreters to sing in their own languages is an invaluable task that we must encourage. And it seems to me that we will have succeeded on the day that no one finds it strange that those who do not speak these languages from birth or whose physical appearance does not fit the stereotype of what is seen as Mexican can sing, converse, and be interested in disseminating and enjoying this marvelous art of the word, of music, and of song.

I want to close with words from Eduardo Dyer:

Let us remember that we Mexicans receive music like a wild, magical, instantaneous substance, that enters and courses through our veins, that comforts the soul, that connects us through all our senses and accompanies us on the voyage that begins at the door of the emotions. Music that celebrates the moment, that honors nostalgia, that calms the living and the dead, that receives what comes with celebration, that bids farewell to what goes with celebration. ■■■

Notes

- 1 In addition to her direct work with certain indigenous poets, as she mentions in this article, Tonana's musical style is born of her interest in Mexico's black, indigenous, and mestizo roots. Her discography includes albums like *Xquenda* (1996), *Tonana* (2000), *Lazos* (2006), *Agiüta de tequila* (2010), and *Con el viento*. Her work has been included in collections put out by record companies like Putumayo, Milan Records, Windham Hill Records, and EMI. Her work and career can be followed through her web page (www.tonana.com) and on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TonanaOficial>) and Instagram (http://picdeer.org/tonana_music). [Editor's Note.]
- 2 Miguel León-Portilla, "El destino de las lenguas indígenas en el tercer milenio," *Arqueología mexicana* no. 85 (dedicated to Mexico's indigenous languages) (2019), pp. 10-12. [Editor's Note.]
- 3 For more about this group, go to their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Hamac-Caziim-159099780851137/>. [Editor's Note.]
- 4 See the "Conjuros y ebriedades" blog, <http://conjurosyebriedades.blogspot.com/>. Also available is the YouTube video "Poesía y rezos tzotziles 2. Conjuros y ebriedades," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbvQItA3RHY>. [Editor's Note.]
- 5 Tonana, "Vayan lolol vayan," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oc4WVx37VcY>. [Editor's Note.]