“It Is Not Really Something You Would Show In A Concert, Right?”
Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales
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Between 1963 and 1971 a total of fifty-four composers coming from all across Latin America went to Buenos Aires to study classical music composition at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM), part of the Di Tella Institute. After its closing, having studied at—or even with someone who attended—the CLAEM has been invoked to confer artistic prestige within avant-garde circles. There were several trends explored by composers during the nine years of the existence of the Center, including aleatoric and indeterminate operations, serialism, mass-sound textures, mobile forms, and notably, electronic and musique concrète composition. This meant that at different moments it became central to have an experimental approach to music making. The two instances where this was most evident were the Laboratorio de música electrónica (electronic music laboratory) established initially in 1963, but becoming fully functional only in 1966, and in the free improvisation group formed by students and professors of the CLAEM in 1969, called Grupo de experimentación musical (GEM).

The CLAEM included the Laboratorio de música electrónica as part of its facilities since it resonated with the modernizing impetus of the Di Tella Institute as a whole and the pedagogical goal of the Center to provide up-to-date compositional training. The Laboratorio provided hands-on experience with the latest innovations in electronic sound production and recording manipulation. It promptly became a staple of the CLAEM and a pioneer electroacoustic music studio in Latin America. The scientific tinge in the discourse around it—such as calling the studio a laboratory, labeling concerts of electroacoustic music ‘experimental music concerts,’ and using mathematical models or acoustic phenomena to generate works—showed that the studio was a visible sign of modernity in its configuration, its inventions, its machinery and its sonic results. At the same time, the history of its creation and the complex reception of the works that were produced, show the tensions that came with its experimental nature as it challenged traditional ways of thinking composition.

Very much like the electronic music laboratory, the Grupo de experimentación musical acted as a playground for the discovery of novel and original sonic materials through performances ranging from free improvisation to detailed graphic scores. Improvisatory practices at the CLAEM, and to some degree in Buenos Aires in general, took full force in 1969. In mid-1967 the Argentine composer Gerardo Gandini had returned to teach at the CLAEM after a stay in Italy where he had developed an interest in improvisation groups. Having learned about the practices of the Gruppo di Improvisazione Nuova Consonanza founded by the Italian composer Franco Evangelisti, and the Musica Elettronica Viva group that had started in Rome the year before, Gandini though he could organize something similar at the CLAEM.¹ By 1969 the composers at the CLAEM learned that there was no money in that year’s budget for paying performers

to play the most recent pieces they had composed they decided to still hold a concert but instead of programming pieces by each individual fellow, perform five collective improvisations with titles but no composer indicated by a new ensemble they formed called the Grupo de Experimentación Musical.²

Alberto Ginastera, director of the CLAEM, agreed with Gandini that it was useful to have a space—a type of workshop—where composers could experiment with instruments, try new sounds and techniques, and have a hands-on experience with each other’s music. But he was not convinced that this should be taken to the stage as an ensemble. Ginastera had a very hard time accepting the avant-garde aesthetics that came out of the group’s improvisations. Kusnir remembers Ginastera telling them, “Well, this whole free improvisation group is good so that you all practice and experiment among yourselves with different things. But it is not really something you would show in a concert, right?”

This chapter explores how both the Laboratorio de música electrónica and the Grupo de experimentación musical were framed as spaces for experimentation, and how this allowed for the articulation of desires for subversive and emancipatory music making. In both cases, musical experimentation resulted in strong reactions from the critics, from other composers and anxieties among its practitioners. In a musical tradition where virtuosity over one’s instrument is praised, the fact that these composers would take to the concert stage and play instruments that they had not mastered, or in other cases present pieces that required no performers at all, resulted in a tension that not only troubled the critics but also the composers themselves. New questions emerged as experimentalism in practice challenged discourses of musicality, talent and authorship as well as the nature of the classical music concert.

² The Grupo de Experimentación Musical was called, on different occasions, Grupo de Improvisación Musical, and also GEDI, standing for Grupo Experimental de Improvisación. Still, it was more widely known as the GEM or Grupo de Experimentación Musical. The members were Jorge Antunes, Rafael Aponte-Ledée, León Birioti, Jorge Blarduni, Gabriel Brnčić, Pedro Caryevschi, Bruno D’Astoli, Eduardo Kusnir, Beatriz Lockhart, José Ramón Maranzano, Ariel Martínez, Antonio Mastrogiovanni, Alejandro Nuñez Allauca, and Luis Zubillaga, all under the direction of Gerardo Gandini