

MISA DE LOS MINEROS

An introduction to the Misa de los Mineros from Dr Robinson Rojas Sandford written for the 1999 CD recording Pilgrimage to the Andes

I am not a musician. It is therefore a difficult task to write about a musical work. Nevertheless, I confess to crying when I listen to Shostakovich's 10th Symphony or Victor Jara's 'Te recuerdo Amanda'. I also acknowledge that I feel proud, sad and angry when I listen to Beethoven's 9th Symphony or Patricio Manns' 'Vuelvo'. And then also, I understand music to be just another language used by human beings to communicate with one another. Yet communication through music has its rewards: it is communication through beauty. Mauricio Venegas-Astorga, Quimantu's director, is communicating a lot of things through his music and words and his very personal way of mixing them both. Of course, if his way of communicating was not personal he would not really qualify as an artist. Moreover, if his words were not rooted in the landscape which gave life to his body and mind, he would not qualify as the great artist that he is.

With this work, Mauricio has extracted beauty from tragedy; the same tragedy of hundreds of thousands of Chileans: his landscape was raped, victimised and almost totally destroyed by the four bandits who forced their way into total power following Black Tuesday in September 1973. Mauricio's great achievement as a musician and as a political being – which is part of being a complete human being – is that his music and his words communicate not only to Chilean people but to anyone in Asia, Africa or Latin America, the hope that our landscape can be rebuilt to the shape it was and then go further on from there and build a more humane society. A society which will not accept murderers and thieves shielding themselves behind military uniforms.

Mauricio's musical and poetic work comes from an old Latin American tradition of writers, poets, musicians, teachers and students using our literature and music as tools for the political education of people attempting to create spiritual beauty as the first step leading to social beauty. Mauricio has developed another Latin American musical tradition, that of pushing Catholic religion closer to grassroots social groups adding real words contained in real music played with real instruments to the Catholic mass. For us Latin Americans, this means the use of our folk music, our charango and quena, and our way of talking to God to tell him how the bandits down here use his name to shed blood among the people. Our folk masses have always been presented in two sections: with the traditional Catholic mass from introit to Agnus Dei, and the 'Christmas Mass' (Misa Navidena) – musical celebration of Nativity with folk music and lyrics. The second section, in Mauricio's work is especially beautiful, particularly 'Belen's little shepherd' with the nine year old Laura Venegas Rojas on vocals.

Misa de los Mineros: Plegaria del Pueblo (Miners' Mass: A People's Prayer) is most importantly a prayer of a proud group of workers in Chile: the coal miners. The coal miners in Lota and Coronel work in underground mines that go under the seabed. For generations, the coal miners in Chile have been the first to fight for social rights

and the first to be killed, initially by the armed men of their British employers and years later by employers from their own country. Coal miners enter the mine without knowing if they are going to return alive at the end of the shift. Coal miners' wives, mothers and children do not know either. And all of them know what type of society makes this hell on earth possible. Thus, in Lota and coronel, Christianity and revolution go hand in hand in the same way as it did in the catacombs in Roman times.

Mauricio belongs to that landscape. There the sun rises over the mountains and disappears into the sea and the people work in the bowels of the earth producing wealth for others. Solidarity, Christian solidarity, human solidarity and revolutionary solidarity grow easily in such conditions.....quality spiritual works also grow easily in these conditions. And the seeds planted in such conditions create roots that are so strong that not even twenty years of absence can destroy them. Those roots are present in Mauricio's mass; so strongly present that his work appears as a quantum leap in the Latin American tradition of the 'folk mass' which the Liberation Theology fostered increasingly in the early 1960's when the first folk mass was presented on Argentine TV: the Folk Mass for Soloists, Chorus and Orchestra, by Ariel Ramirez and Los Fronterizos as soloists (Misa Criolla para Solistas, Coro y Orquesta).

Folk masses were part of the political popular movements which brought the possibilities of revolution to the doors of the Brazilian, Uruguayan, Argentinean and Chilean societies in the 1960s. In the 1970s the forces of darkness unleashed a brutal assault on the people of those countries and started building 'new societies' on the corpses of people to protect the interest of the wealthy few. Today, twenty-five years after hell began descending upon our land, Mauricio's mass, its spirit and its sound could be an omen.

Robinson Rojas Sandford (Dr), 1998