The Ibero-American Preservation Platform of Sound and Audiovisual Heritage

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Abstract
The richness of sound and audiovisual collections in Latin America is noticeable, but so is also the risk of their imminent disappearance. The Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico, with the cooperation and support of IASA and FIAT, promoted in 2010, a Latin American Meeting of Sound and Audiovisual Archives. The purpose was to establish a work group and to develop an integral project with a working agenda for rescuing sound and audiovisual archives at risk. A first experience has been made, in collaboration with the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico and the CDI, analysing the archives of the indigenous radio stations in Mexico.

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Pio Pellizzari studied musicology, roman philology and French literature. He was a scientific collaborator for musicology at the libraries of the Universities of Lausanne and Fribourg elaborating musical inheritance and producing catalogues of musical works. He taught music at the secondary school, and was scientific librarian at the University of Fribourg, creating a sound archives for the University. In 2003/04 he has been invited professor at the University of Zürich. Since 1998, he is director of the Swiss National Sound Archives; board member of the National Museum of Switzerland; and since 2005 Vice-President of IASA and chair of the Training & Education Committee, which he founded.

1. Introduction
It is an undisputed fact that Latin America possesses an abundant audio and audiovisual heritage. But the richness of that heritage is matched by the dangers it faces, the risk of the imminent disappearance, it might in fact be lost forever. Many audiovisual collections are housed in highly precarious conditions, while the personnel responsible for them are often either badly trained or not trained at all. And the infrastructure necessary to ensure the preservation of this cultural legacy is insufficient, in some places non-existent.

There have been many efforts made up to the present day to counteract the possible disintegration of these collections, but these efforts were and remain often isolated and sporadic. In most cases they were only ever applied to one aspect of the conservation process. However, well-meaning they may have been, they have often remained without any degree of sustainability.
It is urgently necessary to define a common policy and strategy to develop common guidelines and a coordinated course of action in order to create the basic conditions needed to save this cultural heritage. This paper is intended to give a brief overview of a large-scale project initiated in Latin America. It will also offer an interim report on the activities undertaken up to now by taking a closer look both at smaller-scale projects that have already been completed and at the practical experience that has been gathered.

For several years, the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico has been active in this regard. After Mexico created this institution for preserving audiovisual documents – the very first National sound archives in Latin America – it has in recent years developed into a real centre of competence for the region as a whole, taking on the necessary coordinating activities that come with such a function.

2. The First Steps

On the basis of its own experiences and in full knowledge of the current situation, the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico initiated a Latin-American conference on sound and audiovisual archives in August 2010, in collaboration with IASA (International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives) and FIAT (Fédération Internationale des Archives de Télévision) and supported by both organisation.

The goal was to form a working group in which the different regions and countries are represented, and to fix an agenda in order to develop all-encompassing projects for endangered audiovisual collections. Six Latin-American countries participated: Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Honduras, and Cuba and built up a strategic alliance for a collaboration. In order to achieve this goal, a preliminary, common plan of action was defined. This was to comprise the following points:

1. Creating a questionnaire to make possible both an analysis of a collection and a diagnosis regarding its condition;
2. Creating didactic guidelines for audiovisual archives;
3. Creating a glossary in order to unify concepts and definitions;
4. Making a didactic video to provide a preliminary aid for basic training;
5. Drawing up a process model for developing a rescue plan;
6. Realizing a pilot project in Mexico with the archives of indigenous radio stations.

During the first working meeting, conceptual references were standardised, and priorities and a working programme were defined. The first task on this programme was undertaken by the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico together with IASA. They created a web platform, The Ibero-American Preservation Platform of Sound and Audiovisual Heritage, with the goal of providing tools to the different archives of the region to enable them to embark on preserving their cultural heritage in their own language and in accordance with their respective local circumstances.

The questionnaire is one of these tools. It is an aid to evaluation and description in the task of analysing an audiovisual collection. It was drawn up after the example of a similar questionnaire made for the ICRT (Istituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión) in Cuba, and on the basis of experiences made in the European TAPE project. Such analyses should give one a basis from which to establish the state of conservation of the individual sound and audiovisual documents, and to determine which archives are particularly endangered.

In a second step, initial, urgent measures can then be undertaken. As a preliminary measure for the conservation of sound collections in Costa Rica and Honduras, a list was drawn up with specific advice
that took also into account the respective local conditions. Further to this, a diploma training programme for documentalists of audiovisual objects has been developed, and a first course for 25 specialists in this field was held. Finally, a Spanish translation was made of both the TC-04, The Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects, and of the IASA cataloguing rules for audiovisual documents. In the meantime, a first international seminar for sound archives was organised and carried out by the Radio Nacional de Columbia, featuring lectures and tutorials. On a political level, a matter of particular importance was the creation of the ‘Iberoamerican Network Sound Heritage’ at the Fourteenth Ibero-American Culture Forum. Furthermore, the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico has built up a strategic collaboration with the following countries: Columbia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Cuba, Switzerland, Austria, France and Spain.

In order to consolidate its role as a competence centre and to be able to take on corresponding tasks, the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico, together with the Teaching & Education (T&E) Committee of IASA, has developed a specific training and continuing education programme for future trainers. The goal of this programme is to gather together existing expertise in matters of handling and archiving sound recordings, of digitisation and the archiving of audiovisual documents in digital form. Then in special courses, this expertise will be conveyed to the institution’s own trainers (in other words, it offers training for trainers). This is especially important, since it means that when working with archives of indigenous peoples (such as ‘Indio radio stations’), training can be offered in the local language and with local people who know the state of the conditions on the ground. Not least of all, this can also help to guarantee a certain degree of sustainability.

In the first programme, the chief technician of the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico has undergone in-depth, specialized training in the Austrian Phonogrammarchiv in Vienna and in the Swiss National Sound Archives. The technicians working in these two institutions prepared a special work programme that dealt with all possible problem cases and how to solve them. The training was completed when the chief technician himself led a practical workshop at the annual IASA conference. This form of training and continuing education is already bearing its first fruits: two technicians working in regional radio archives in Mexico has been trained in the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico and they are at present in Switzerland and in Austria in order to consolidate their knowledge. These are the first steps undertaken during the last years.

3. Further Steps Planned and Medium-Term Goals

The creation of a bibliography and documentation in Spanish is planned, as is the Spanish translation of a selection of specific articles, mostly published in English, on different aspects of audiovisual archiving. As far as possible, the basic training should be offered in the form of an online training programme, mainly for a first general training of archivists and documentalists. The mentioned Preservation Platform will also be made available for the exchange of experiences and is intended to be added to, gradually, with recommendations for the archiving and conservation of audiovisual documents, and it is to be supplemented by a list with guidelines for creating an emergency plan for endangered collections. A further plan is to promote a supra-regional, global inventory of the Ibero-American sound and audiovisual heritage, on the basis of standards recognised and supported by IASA and FIAT and coordinated by Mexico, through the Fonoteca Nacional del CONACULTA. The ‘train the trainer’ programme started successfully last year in the field of audio and digital technology for the preservation of audiovisual heritage. It is now to be expanded and consolidated. The goal is to build up a network of competency
throughout the whole of Latin America. Finally, an “Iberomemoria Fund” is to be created, in collaboration with the “General Secretary for Iberoamerica”, in order to offer financial support for endangered archives in developing and emerging countries.

4. A First Progress Report

In October 2010, the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico and the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) started an analysis programme together with those responsible for the sound archives of Mexico’s indigenous radio stations. For this purpose, the above mentioned questionnaire was used. At the same time this served as a test to establish the usefulness of the questionnaire itself. In parallel with this, a basic course was held in archiving audiovisual documents. Working with the questionnaire proved effective, but it also showed that the glossary with concepts and definitions is necessary to understand it properly. The combination of analysis work with basic training also proved very helpful. Early results included the identification of several endangered collections and the subsequent introduction of preliminary conservation measures. A special emergency plan was developed for the XEZON radio station, whose archives were in a very critical condition. Here, in brief, is a historical review of the state of things.

In November 1991, XEZON went on the air for the first time with a test broadcast. Right from the start, this radio station became the “voice of the Sierra de Zongolica” and became particularly important for the local indigenous population. In 1998, torrential rains flooded a large part of the city of Zongolica, with buildings up to 1.20 m under water. This included the radio station. Not only its infrastructure and its sound archive were damaged but also the whole radio building was ruined. The radio station thereupon moved to the Centro para el Desarrollo Coordinador de los Pueblos Indígenas in a higher part of the city of Zongolica. Today, it broadcasts every day from six o’clock in the morning to six o’clock in the evening. Its programmes are in Spanish and Nahuatl and cover the regions of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Puebla and Tlaxcala, which together have some 30 larger urban areas and about 690,000 inhabitants, of whom more than 226,000 are counted among the indigenous population.

The founding of XEZON Radio has served to strengthen the language Nahuatl in a sustainable manner and has led to the creation of important cultural organisations such as folk music groups and dance groups. It has also helped to prevent traditional indigenous healing practices from being forgotten. The audiences have been reminded again of their own traditional music, a music that had been driven out by the commercial music industry. The radio has given renewed life to the following:

- Music for traditional customs and ceremonies;
- Nahuatl dances and Nahuatl compositions;
- Nahuatl tales and stories;
- Folk music and traditional music;
- Traditional medicine;
- etc.

5. Analysis and Emergency Measures

The Radio’s extensive sound archives were dried as well as possible after the floods, taken to their new location and stored there. The analysis of the collection made in autumn 2010, however, brought the
following situation to light. The sound documents – in this case, tapes – showed signs of decay and were being attacked by micro-organisms and fungus. The glued joints on the tapes had crystallized and were beginning to come apart. The first attempts at cleaning proved to be quite difficult. Many tapes were damaged, with their reels deformed because of being stored both incorrectly and in unsatisfactory climatic conditions.
As a result of this analysis, the following steps for further work were determined:

1. Transfer and admission of the collection to Fonoteca Nacional;
2. Replacing all boxes and reels that had been infested by micro-organisms;
3. Winding all tapes anew;
4. Stabilizing the tapes by placing them in a temporary storage space where the temperature and humidity were controlled;
5. Giving an archive number to boxes and reels;
6. Creating an inventory in order not to lose the original information.

When carrying out this work, it was discovered that the magnetic tapes were in an advanced state of oxidation, which meant that digitization had to be planned as quickly as possible. As a result, all the tapes were wound anew, and all old glued joints were taken apart, cleaned carefully and replaced by new ones. This work took place under the supervision of a specialist. Already here, the basic training that had been carried out at the beginning proved its worth.

In order to plan the digitization, a priority list was drawn up on the basis of the physical state of the tapes, the brand of tape, and in part, on the basis of their content. When digitizing, tests and quality control measures were carried out for each individual tape. The results, the technical data and supplementary remarks were recorded on a technical form filled out by the personnel responsible for transferring the audio document.

These salvaged documents are a part of the collective memory of the people of Zongolica, hitherto transmitted only orally, comprising their language, their music and dances, their customs and rites, and not least of all their knowledge – in this case, their knowledge of traditional medicine.

The conservation of over 400 magnetic tapes – their analysis, cleaning and copying into a digital format suited for long-term archiving – can serve as an example of how to develop a generic model for saving a sound collection. Above all, this project can also serve as a template for the indigenous communities of all regions of Latin America whose audiovisual heritage is in a similar state. Here is a summary of the workflow for the preservation of the Radio XEZON collection of Zongolica.
WORKFLOW FOR THE ATTENTION OF
THE COLLECTION RADIO XEZON OF ZONGOLICA

Application of the questionnaire to the SRCI of the CDI → Analysis and systematization of results → Identification of collections at risk: XEZON Zongolica

Transfer and admission of the collection to Fonoteca Nacional → Assignment of inventory number → Stabilization in vaults

Counting and implementation of the first tasks of conservation → Diagnosis conservation → Application of specific cleaning protocols

Digitization and if necessary, digital restoration → Cataloguing → Access

Access
6. Future Prospects

Now our task is to forge further strategic alliances such as the one with the CDI in Mexico, which made these initial experiences possible. The collaboration with IASA and FIAT has to be promoted, enabling us to put those institutions’ expertise to practical use by means of education and further training. Above all, however, we should win over further audiovisual archives in Latin America and convince them to join this platform in order to achieve the goals mentioned at the outset here:

- A comprehensive, global inventory of the audiovisual archives of Latin America;
- Expanding the training programme for future trainers; and
- Preserving the cultural heritage of Latin America according to recognised standards.

This project enables the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico to identify endangered sound and audiovisual archives in Latin America, to promote their conservation and thereby to help support the cultural identity of the local populations.