

The Life of “El Condor Pasa”—Indigenismo, Authorship, Decolonisation, and Heritage-making

Gehong Li*

Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, United States

ligehong0321@gmail.com

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Metacultural Production, Cultural Hybridity, Heritagization, Decolonizing Music Education, Indigenismo

Abstract: This paper critically examines *El Condor Pasa* by Daniel Alom á Robles as a multidimensional artefact embedded within Peruvian *Indigenismo* and nationalist discourses of the early 20th century, analysing its implications for questions of authorship, cultural hybridity, and heritage. Through an analysis of the musical score, I argue that both the title *El Condor Pasa* and its subtitle, *Inca Dance*, are inherently entangled with cultural politics, representing a confluence of indigenous iconography and *mestizo* identity. This construction of a *mestizo* protagonist, symbolising liberty and defiance, serves not only the *Indigenismo* project to “shape homogeneous citizens for the nation-state” [1], but also offers a reflection of the intricate social hierarchies and racialised tensions between Lima’s urban elite and the indigenous migrant labour force. I explore the implications for indigenous practices when the *yarav* inspired melodies of *El Condor Pasa* permeate the urban milieu of the Peruvian capital. The latter part of this paper engages with the Eurocentric structures governing Peruvian music pedagogy, particularly the colonialist biases that relegated *Indigenismo* compositions like *El Condor Pasa* to a secondary status. By situating *El Condor Pasa* within broader postcolonial and intangible heritage frameworks, this paper investigates whether Peruvian conservatoires can play a role in the decolonisation of cultural institutions by integrating indigenous music into a collective national heritage, potentially reshaping the nation’s musical and cultural identity.

1. Introduction

The musical composition *El Condor Pasa* by Daniel Alom á Robles has emerged as a powerful symbol within Peru’s cultural and musical history, epitomising the complexities of heritage, national identity, and the legacies of colonialism embedded within Peruvian *Indigenismo*. Created during the early 20th century, *El Condor Pasa* is more than a musical composition; it is an artefact deeply entwined with the aspirations of nation-building projects, which sought to integrate and elevate indigenous culture within the national imaginary, while simultaneously catering to the tastes and expectations of Lima’s urban, *criollo* elites. As an embodiment of *mestizo* identity through both its

lyrical themes and musical structure, *El Condor Pasa* serves as a case study through which the intricate intersections of authorship, cultural hybridity, and heritage-making can be interrogated, revealing the multivalent processes of inclusion, exclusion, and recontextualisation within the socio-cultural and political landscapes of 20th-century Peru.

This paper approaches *El Condor Pasa* through the lens of intangible heritage studies, with an emphasis on its entanglement in discourses of *Indigenismo*. This early 20th-century Latin American cultural movement sought to celebrate and valorise indigenous heritage as a component of national identity, albeit frequently mediated through *mestizo* or *criollo* interpretations rather than by indigenous people themselves. *Indigenismo* in Peru, as in much of Latin America, entailed a dialectic of appropriation and subordination: while the movement ostensibly celebrated indigenous contributions to the national character, it often marginalised actual indigenous voices, rendering them symbolic rather than participatory. Within this context, *El Condor Pasa* emerges as both a celebration and a commodification of indigenous identity, invoking questions about the agency, authorship, and cultural authenticity of works that derive from indigenous musical traditions but are mediated through Western musical notation and forms.

The enduring influence of *El Condor Pasa* is further complicated by the global appeal of the melody, which has transcended its original Peruvian context to become an emblem of Andean cultural identity on an international scale. This internationalisation underscores how intangible heritage can be transformed and reinterpreted across diverse socio-political and cultural contexts, raising critical questions about the role of heritage as a vehicle for both cultural transmission and commodification. Scholars in postcolonial and heritage studies argue that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) must be understood as a dynamic and contested field where cultural meaning is continuously negotiated, particularly when traditional knowledge is mediated through Western frameworks of copyright and authorship [2, 4].

In this context, the circulation of *El Condor Pasa* outside of Peru can be viewed as a form of “metacultural production” [4], whereby cultural forms are reconstituted in ways that both preserve and transform their original meanings. This production is not only aesthetic but is also laden with ideological and epistemic dimensions, as the adaptation of indigenous forms into globalised musical structures involves the redefinition of heritage within a commodified framework that risks obscuring its historical and social origins. By exploring *El Condor Pasa*’s journey from its inception as a work embedded within Peruvian nationalist discourses to its subsequent transformation into a symbol of Andean identity worldwide, this paper addresses how intangible heritage operates within processes of cultural appropriation, national identity formation, and postcolonial decolonisation.

This paper proceeds by analysing *El Condor Pasa* in two key respects: first, as an *indigenista* artefact that reveals the socio-political entanglements of *Indigenismo* in Peru, and second, as a site of cultural contestation within Eurocentric musical institutions, where colonialist hierarchies continue to shape perceptions of indigenous musical forms. By examining these dimensions, this study contributes to an understanding of how intangible heritage, especially as mediated through Western art forms, is entangled with global flows of power and cultural capital. Ultimately, this paper interrogates whether the ongoing efforts to decolonise Peruvian cultural institutions can foster a more inclusive heritage framework, one that authentically integrates indigenous music within the nation’s cultural repertoire and resists the reductive commodification that has historically accompanied the internationalisation of indigenous cultural forms. Through this dual focus, this study aims to elucidate the ways in which intangible heritage can either reinforce or dismantle structures of colonial hegemony, depending on how it is represented, circulated, and recontextualised within both national and global arenas.

2. Daniel Alom á Robles and the Cultural Resonance of *El Condor Pasa*

Daniel Alom á Robles was born in the Andean highlands of Peru, specifically in the city of Hu ánuco, into a family of French descent. At the age of 13, he moved to the capital, Lima, where he began formal studies in music theory and piano, although he did not pursue higher education in music [8]. Robles' engagement with indigenous Andean music began in earnest in 1896 when he embarked on fieldwork across the Andean highlands to document a vast array of indigenous melodies, which became foundational to his subsequent compositions. His collection and adaptation of Andean musical motifs into Western notation, especially his 1933 piano arrangement of *El Condor Pasa*, for which he registered a copyright in the United States, marked a pivotal point in his career [2]. The Peruvian government's later designation of *El Condor Pasa* as a national masterpiece attributed solely to Robles encapsulates the nationalistic appropriation of indigenous culture, yet his method of reinterpreting Andean folk music has generated sustained debate concerning authorship, ownership, and cultural integrity, especially given that his fieldwork extended across Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia [2, 8]. Addressing these questions necessitates an examination of Robles' original score in light of the socio-political and cultural ideologies that shaped and were reciprocally shaped by *El Condor Pasa*; it is this exploration that forms the primary focus of this paper.

3. The “Inca Dance” and the Ambivalence of *Indigenismo* in Peru

Robles' *El Condor Pasa* is characterised by an austere, minimalist score (see Figure 1), relatively unadorned by the nuanced articulation and dynamics found in typical 20th-century European compositions. Titled *El Condor Pasa* (The Condor Passes) with a bracketed subtitle *Inca Dance*, the work is clearly intended to evoke a connection to a broader Andean cultural legacy while aligning itself with *Indigenismo*. At first glance, the subtitle “Inca Dance” suggests an ambitious attempt to synthesise various elements of Andean musical heritage into a cohesive form, ostensibly honouring the diverse musical expressions of the region during the time of the Incan Empire. Structurally, however, the composition's tripartite form (*yarav í pasacalle*, *huayno*) reveals a clear affinity with European Baroque suite traditions, signalling a hybridised musical expression that encapsulates both Andean dance rhythms and the formal aesthetics of Western classical music [2]. This hybridised quality allows *El Condor Pasa* to inhabit an ambiguous space within *Indigenismo*, aligning with the project's aim to project an indigenous or *mestizo* culture while resonating with the tastes and expectations of the *criollo* and *mestizo* urban elites of early 20th-century Peru [9].



Figure 1: Robles' piano arrangement of *El Condor Pasa*, secured copyright in the United States in 1933 [3].

The larger movement of *Indigenismo*, of which *El Condor Pasa* is a product, sought to construct a unified national identity by idealising the indigenous “other.” However, this reimagining often substituted indigenous protagonists with *criollo* or *mestizo* figures, ultimately framing indigenous identities within an urban, *criollo*-dominated context [5, 9]. This act of cultural substitution represents a symbolic appropriation of indigenous identity, driven by the aspirations of urban intellectuals and artists rather than the authentic practices of indigenous peoples. As Richard Schaedel (1979) documents, the process of acculturation imposed by the dominant *criollo* society on highland migrants systematically marginalised indigenous customs and identities in the Peruvian capital, enforcing a suppression of indigenous expression [9].

“[The] patterns of acculturation that the dominant urban *criollo* society imposed upon the migrants were fairly well observed. Attributes of indigenous origin were simply not tolerated in Lima (e.g. Indian dress, bare-footedness, coca chewing, Quechua speech) [...] It was clear that migrants who came to Lima [...] were obliged to adopt *criollo* ways and suppress their ethnicity, and part of the *criollo* way was to accept their role as manual workers and subordinate people.”

In light of these dynamics, the title *El Condor Pasa* assumes a complex cultural significance. First performed in 1913 as a zarzuela at Lima’s Teatro Mazzi, the work’s narrative, developed by librettist Julio Baudouin, presents a *mestizo* miner, Frank, who defies his colonial overseers, with the condor symbolising resistance against imperial oppression [6]. Baudouin’s portrayal of Frank as a *mestizo* hero highlights an ideological rupture within the social hierarchy of early 20th-century Peru, challenging the dominant-dominated dichotomy by presenting a *mestizo* figure as a conduit of indigenous strength and defiance [2]. Thus, *El Condor Pasa* is infused with a dual symbolism, simultaneously resisting the subjugative ethos of the *criollo* elite while constructing an indigenous cultural identity mediated through a *mestizo* lens, which in turn raises questions about the authenticity of its representation.

The reception of *El Condor Pasa* reflects the work’s ability to navigate these symbolic and social tensions effectively. Following its premiere, the zarzuela achieved remarkable popularity, running for over 3,000 performances at the Mazzi Theatre over five consecutive years [6, 9]. The *yarav* inspired melody of *El Condor Pasa*, rooted in Andean musical tradition, quickly became a popular phenomenon in the streets of Lima, where it resonated with the experiences of highland migrants who had become part of the city’s expanding proletariat. The French folklorist couple, the d’Harcourts, remarked on the rapid diffusion of the piece, which underscores the transformative power of its melody [2]:

“This piece offers an interesting example of how, in all countries, folk melodies are fixed, or rather of how they are transformed and modelled. The melody of this fragment came originally from the folk; it is an indigenous theme that Mr. A. Robles, whom we have previously mentioned, used in a small lyrical story, *El Cónдор Pasa*, [...] staged with success in Lima. From this work, the folk has retained the fragments that were already familiar to it, and it is one of those fragments that street musicians tried to reproduce from memory; we have in turn tried to transcribe it as we heard them play it.”

The d’Harcourts’ observation sheds light on the perception of *El Condor Pasa*’s melodic authenticity, suggesting that the *yarav* inspired theme resonated with migrant musicians not merely for its familiarity but because of the cultural symbolism it engendered. However, the widespread circulation of the melody should also be understood within the zarzuela’s framework as a *mestizo* artefact created primarily for a *criollo* audience. While the work may have opened a symbolic space for discussions around indigeneity, these conversations were largely confined to the *criollo* intelligentsia, excluding the voices and lived realities of migrant workers themselves [2]. As a result, *El Condor Pasa* encapsulates the hybridity that characterises *Indigenismo*, embodying both a reflection of indigenous authenticity and an urbanised *mestizo* perspective shaped by the aesthetics

of Western Baroque dance forms.

4. *Indigenista* Composers and the Entrenched Eurocentrism in Peruvian Music Pedagogy

The hybridity embedded in *El Condor Pasa* demands consideration beyond the temporal bounds of the so-called “*Indigenista* Period” (1910-1940) that Turino delineates [9]. Earlier in this paper, I noted that Robles’ *Inca Dance* demonstrates structural congruities with European Baroque dance forms rather than with the avant-garde trends of 20th-century European classical music. This stylistic choice is significant within the context of Peruvian music conservatoires, which, as Romero [5] discusses, were heavily influenced by European faculty members, most notably Rudolph Holzmann, who was appointed Professor of Composition at the National Conservatory in 1945. Holzmann’s views exemplify the Eurocentric biases that pervaded Peruvian music institutions, relegating indigenous music to a subordinate status and positioning it as technically inferior to Western art music [5]:

“Many are the ‘indigenistas’ that complain about the public’s indifference towards vernacular music, harshly criticizing those that prefer European music to everything that originates from pentatonism. I frankly do not see why this should be so, for while it is true that vernacular music deserves, to some degree, everyone’s attention, being its study quite interesting to certain people, it is equally true that in Peru it has yet to be presented in an elevated artistic form, as has been the case with European music.”

“Robles [...] These scores are for the most part defective when it comes to their technical realization and sound effects. [...] Here we find the most tragic aspect of Peruvian musical panorama, one which does not point toward a single composer that is linked to perfection, at least regarding his technical knowledge, due to the lack of adequate means for artistic orientation and musical education.”

Holzmann’s statements reflect an implicit cultural hierarchy that valorises European classical music as the epitome of artistic “perfection,” thereby marginalising indigenous Peruvian forms as lacking in sophistication. This notion of artistic hierarchy reaffirms Romantic ideals of genius and technical mastery, casting Robles’ works as deficient within a European aesthetic framework. The critique of *indigenista* compositions here underscores the cultural gatekeeping inherent in Peruvian music institutions, which have historically limited the agency of indigenous traditions within the national cultural narrative.

Yet, Romero [5] presents a more nuanced view, arguing that Holzmann recognised, at least in theory, that the development of an authentic Peruvian musical identity should be driven by Peruvian composers. He remarked on the conservatoire’s role as advisory rather than directive [5]:

“If the musical art of the future is to be created in Peru, it is the task of Peruvian composers to forge it. Upon them depends entirely the future of a genuine Peruvian musical creation. What we can do is simply to serve as advisors, collaborating with the necessary artistic education that will serve as a base for a healthy and fruitful development. I can declare, without the danger of being misunderstood, that *our* collaboration is necessary, because we have not found among the works of Peruvian authors the representative work that we have been searching for.”

As Romero notes, this anticipated “collaboration” between Peruvian conservatoires and indigenous traditions did not materialise until 2010, when the newly established Ministry of Culture instituted a Department of Cultural Heritage [7]. Although indigenous singers from the Andes now occasionally collaborate with Peru’s National Symphony Orchestra, these engagements remain largely confined to Western symphonic contexts, thus preserving a Eurocentric paradigm in Peruvian music pedagogy [7]. Furthermore, colonial-era stereotypes of indigenous music persist, with Andean forms like the *yaraví* often viewed by elites as “gloomy and sinister” reflections of a

supposedly backward, impoverished culture [7].

5. Conclusion

El Condor Pasa serves as a compelling artefact through which to examine the intersections of *Indigenismo*, intangible heritage, and the enduring legacies of colonialism within Peruvian cultural production. This study has demonstrated that Robles' work exemplifies how hybridised compositions, shaped through the recontextualisation of indigenous melodies within Western musical frameworks, can become both vehicles for nationalistic aspirations and objects of global commodification. At its core, *El Condor Pasa* encapsulates the paradoxical impulses of the *Indigenismo* movement: while it celebrates an indigenous musical legacy, it does so by mediating that legacy through a *mestizo* and *criollo* lens, ultimately excluding indigenous agency in its creation and circulation. This form of cultural mediation reinforces a problematic dynamic within heritage-making processes, where indigenous cultural forms are celebrated as national heritage yet remain divorced from the lived experiences and epistemic sovereignty of indigenous communities [1, 2].

Through its investigation of *El Condor Pasa*, this paper has addressed how intangible heritage, when inscribed within Western frameworks of authorship and institutional gatekeeping, risks commodifying indigenous identity while silencing the very voices it purports to represent. The designation of *El Condor Pasa* as a national cultural treasure by the Peruvian government illustrates this risk. Although the piece has indeed become a symbol of Peruvian identity, its widespread appeal and enduring recognition rely on a framework that largely omits indigenous agency. In effect, this appropriation has catalysed a process of “metacultural production” [4] wherein the essence of the work is reconstituted to fit national and international agendas, eroding the organic connections to its indigenous origins.

Moreover, *El Condor Pasa* has achieved a level of global recognition that has transformed it into an international symbol of Andean identity, further complicating the question of authenticity in intangible heritage. This internationalisation illustrates how intangible heritage operates as a “field of cultural production” subject to global flows of capital, taste, and power, wherein cultural artefacts are adapted and commodified in ways that reshape their meanings [2]. The melody's proliferation worldwide, often detached from its historical and socio-political context, highlights the malleability of heritage as it crosses cultural and geographical borders. As such, *El Condor Pasa* provides a critical case study for understanding how intangible cultural heritage can be both a site of cultural preservation and a vector for the subordination of indigenous voices and histories. The dynamic interplay between preservation and subordination, authenticity and hybridity, and local significance versus global commodification raises important questions about the responsibilities of heritage practitioners and policymakers in mediating the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

This study has also explored the colonialist legacies entrenched within Peruvian music pedagogy, exemplified by the conservatoire system's systematic dismissal of indigenous music as “inferior” or technically lacking. The Eurocentric biases held by influential figures such as Rudolph Holzmann underscore the structural barriers that indigenous and *indigenista* compositions face within the formal institutions that define and disseminate “high culture.” By relegating works like *El Condor Pasa* to a peripheral status within the national cultural canon, these biases have perpetuated a cultural hierarchy that continues to privilege Western art forms over vernacular and indigenous expressions, thereby reinforcing a colonial dichotomy within the Peruvian cultural landscape [7]. This ongoing marginalisation is symptomatic of a broader colonial epistemic framework that valorises European art music as the normative standard against which other forms are judged.

The recent efforts by Peruvian conservatoires and cultural institutions to integrate indigenous

music into the national repertoire mark a significant, if tentative, step towards the decolonisation of Peruvian cultural production. However, as this study has shown, such efforts must be critically examined to ensure that they do not replicate the extractive and paternalistic logics that have historically characterised the treatment of indigenous heritage within nationalist discourses. The integration of indigenous music into the conservatoire system, if approached without a genuine commitment to indigenous agency and epistemic autonomy, risks reinforcing rather than dismantling colonial dynamics. For true decolonisation to occur, it is imperative that indigenous voices be actively involved in the processes of heritage-making and that their cultural forms be valued not as mere artefacts within a Eurocentric framework but as living traditions with intrinsic cultural and historical value.

Thus, the future of *El Condor Pasa* and similar works within the Peruvian heritage framework depends on a radical rethinking of the mechanisms by which heritage is constructed, valued, and transmitted. Peruvian conservatoires and other cultural institutions must critically interrogate their own role in perpetuating colonial hierarchies and work towards a heritage model that recognises indigenous practices as coequal to, rather than derivative of, Western art forms. This shift requires not only structural changes within these institutions but also a broader societal commitment to dismantling the Eurocentric biases that continue to shape perceptions of indigenous culture within Peru and beyond.

In conclusion, *El Condor Pasa* reveals the dual potential of intangible heritage as both a site of cultural resistance and a mechanism of subordination. Its journey from a locally rooted composition to an internationally recognised symbol of Andean culture illustrates the complex entanglements of power, identity, and heritage in a postcolonial context. By examining *El Condor Pasa* through the intersecting lenses of postcolonial studies, heritage studies, and ethnomusicology, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how intangible heritage can simultaneously reinforce and challenge colonial structures, depending on how it is mediated, represented, and institutionalised. As Peru and other nations grapple with the legacies of colonialism within their cultural institutions, the case of *El Condor Pasa* underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to heritage-making—one that centres indigenous voices, values hybridity as a form of resilience rather than compromise, and recognises intangible heritage as a dynamic, living force capable of fostering both cultural pride and critical self-reflection.

References

- [1] Bigenho, M. *Embodied Matters: Bolivian Fantasy and Indigenismo* [J]. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 2006, 11(2): 267-293. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlca.2006.11.2.267>.
- [2] Hafstein, V.T. *Making Intangible Heritage* [M]. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018.
- [3] Jamestapler. *Cóndor Pasa (Peruvian Folk Song) - Daniel Robles (Original Piano Sheet Music)* [EB/OL]. *Cóndor Pasa (Peruvian Folk Song) - Daniel Robles (Original Piano Sheet Music)*, 1970-01-01 [2024-10-27]. <http://boliviatarqa.blogspot.com/2014/08/condor-pasa-peruvian-folk-song-daniel.html>.
- [4] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. *Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production* [J]. *Museum International*, 2004, 56(1-2): 52-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x>.
- [5] L'Hoeste, H.F., Vila, P., Romero, R.R. *Nationalisms and Anti-Indigenismos* [A]. In: L'Hoeste, H.F., Vila, P., eds. *Sound, Image, and National Imaginary in the Construction of Latin/O American Identities* [C]. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017: 91-105.
- [6] Moore, R.D., Clark, W.A., Ritter, J. *Peru and the Andes* [A]. In: Moore, R.D., ed. *Musics of Latin America* [C]. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012: 325-370.
- [7] Romero, R.R. *Decolonising Andean and Peruvian Music: A View from Within* [J]. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 2021, 30(1): 129-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2021.1938626>.
- [8] Stevenson, R. *Alom á Robles, Daniel* [EB/OL]. *Oxford Music Online*, 2001 [2024-10-27]. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.00658>.
- [9] Turino, T. *The Music of Andean Migrants in Lima, Peru: Demographics, Social Power, and Style* [J]. *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, 1988, 9(2): 127-150. <https://doi.org/10.2307/780291>.