Many sounds of silence

I GIVE YOU MY SILENCE
By Mario Vargas Llosa,
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In Mario Vargas Llosa's final novel, *I Give You My Silence*, translated from Spanish by Adrian Nathan West, a poor music critic falls under the spell of a guitarist he hears only once in a courtyard in Lima. What stays with Toño Azpilcueta afterwards is the hush that fell over the courtyard when Lalo Molfino began to play. For a few minutes, Toño felt a kinship with everyone there, including a man whose casual snub had wounded him moments earlier. He has spent much of his life writing about Peruvian music; yet this was the first time he felt quite so keenly what it might do for a country as divided as his.

After Lalo's death, Toño sets out to write his biography by interviewing those who knew the musician. What begins to absorb him is the history of the Peruvian *vals*, which took shape when African, Indigenous and European musical traditions met. Among its early practitioners were labourers who pooled their earnings to buy a friend a guitar. Yet, their songs travelled into elite drawing rooms where the men who composed them would scarcely have been received as guests. Toño sees reason for hope in that journey. Having learnt to love the songs, might the people in those upper echelons come to feel differently about the neighbours who composed them?

Vargas Llosa alternates Toño's investigation and interviews with passages from the book he is writing, revisiting a device he used to more anarchic effect in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Here, this narrative device of alternation offers readers a peek into Toño's



mind and how readily he takes his own response to be something every Peruvian would recognise and relate to. There is something of the old ambition of the Latin American Boom in Toño's desire to fit a country between the covers of a book. The Boom writers — Vargas Llosa was one of the pioneers — believed that a nation's history could be understood through the lives of a few people. But this novel ponders what might happen when a writer begins to see in those people only what suits his argument. The more confidently Toño speaks for Peru, the less readily he hears the people whose lives lend his book its authority. But there is also affection in Vargas Llosa's treatment of Toño. A novelist who once tried to assimilate much of Peru into a book knows why Toño might want to do the same, but he is also aware that this is a quixotic mission.

Vargas Llosa came of age as a novelist in the years after the Cuban Revolution, sharing his generation's hope that socialism could remedy the injustices he saw in Peru. Cuba's treatment of dissent gradually wore down that faith in socialism. By the time the Shining Path, a radical Maoist organisation in Peru, murdered the community organiser, María Elena Moyano, in 1992, he had spent years considering what became of the people who reclaimed the right to speak for themselves once a revolutionary movement had presumed to speak for the populace. Moyano had organised women in Villa El Salvador, Toño's own neighbourhood, and had publicly opposed the guerrillas. They killed her in the community she had helped to build. In the novel, Toño remembers coming home to find Moyano sheltering with his wife and daughters. Two men she identifies as her pursuers have greeted him politely at the door. When he comes to write about her murder, he asks his readers to mourn her and turns, in the same sentence, to his hope that Peruvian music might dissolve the hatred that divides the country. The speed of that transition tells us something about Toño. He understands why Moyano was afraid. What he finds harder to admit in his account is that she and her killers belonged to the same community. She had spent years bringing neighbours together, the very goal he imagines for the *vals*. It was her insistence that those neighbours should have a say in their future that made her dangerous to the men at the door.

In *Conversation in the Cathedral*, Vargas Llosa drew together the voices of people who knew little of one another's lives to show how a dictatorship had touched them all. In his swan song, he poses a more delicate question: can people share an experience and still be free to say that it meant something different to each one of them?

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