

**Life-history in musical research. Leo Brouwer: A case study****Historia de vida en la investigación musical. Caso estudio: Leo Brouwer**

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**Abstract**

The life-history method as a scientific research method in music gains prominence in the twentieth century and grows even more in the present. Its usefulness is appreciated when writing about referent characters in artistic practices for the human being, cultural exchanges, study of personalities, and their effects in the training of new generations of musicians, among others. This method motivated this work, which had as an objective to elucidate the steps that constituted the methodological strategy of application of life-history in musical research, rooted in a study of the artistic output of Leo Brouwer. From a predominantly qualitative approach, interviews and an analysis of documents were combined, which made possible a reflection on the life-history method and its implementation in music research.

**Life-history, Musical research, Leo Brouwer**

**Resumen**

La historia de vida como método de investigación científica en la música toma auge en el siglo XX y se acrecienta en la actualidad. Su utilidad se aprecia en referentes sobre las prácticas artísticas para el ser humano, los intercambios culturales, el estudio de personalidades y su impacto en la formación de nuevas generaciones de músicos, entre otros. Este método motivó este trabajo que tuvo como objetivo mostrar las acciones que constituyeron una estrategia metodológica para la implementación de la historia de vida en la investigación musical, basado en el estudio sobre la producción artística de Leo Brouwer. Desde un enfoque predominantemente cualitativo se combinaron el análisis de documentos y la entrevista lo cual posibilitó la reflexión sobre la historia de vida y su aplicación en la investigación musical.

**Historia de vida, Investigación musical, Leo Brouwer**

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## Introduction

It is common to find Life History in the scientific literature as a method, technique or strategy that helps to facilitate research, especially in art, particularly in its less tangible manifestations such as music, performance and/or musical composition; however, it has been more visible for a long time in Psychology and Sociology, disciplines from which researchers explore aspects related to human beings and their environment. Its use can be seen as a result of research with different purposes: explorations of community and/or age groups, their customs, ways of life, experiences in conflicts, traditions or culture (Ferrarotti, 2007; Leite, 2011; Pérez, 2017); or on the essence of everyday life in social structures and biographical constructions (Camacho and Campos, 2011; Madrid, 2021).

Likewise, this method can explore a wide range of topics that describe problematic or emerging spaces from different areas of knowledge: experiences, identities and developments (Cornejo, Mendoza and Rojas, 2008; Veras, 2010); body of knowledge and its interaction with physical, symbolic and emotional environments; facing educational changes (Hernández, 2011; Hernández, Sancho and Creus, 2011); understanding people's vision of the world and reality (Vidanovic and Osorio, 2018).

Explaining the debate on life history as a method or technique would entail a theoretical analysis that exceeds the limits of this paper. Although these terms are specified in numerous articles, there are also assertions that characterise life history as an approach, methodology, story or memoir, in which its use can be appreciated from the research process itself or as a result of it. From the documentary analysis it can be inferred that there is no consensus in this respect; however, acceptance as a method is recorded in a majority of articles. In this sense, the method can be used with a multidisciplinary vision based on the perception of the subject who reports, the position and decision-making of the researcher and the context experienced in both cases.

As has been expressed, such a multiplicity of uses favours its application in music-related research.

This method motivated this work, which aimed to show the actions that constituted a methodological strategy for the implementation of life history in musical research, based on the study of Leo Brouwer's artistic production.

The work was developed from a predominantly qualitative approach in which the analysis of documents, interviews and systematisation were combined to arrive at results on life history, its use in musical research and its application in the study of the figure of Leo Brouwer. In order to characterise the method, 45 sources were analysed, including articles in scientific journals and books; of these, 33.3% were directly related to their etymology, structure or methodology, and 44.4% to their application in musical research. The main themes identified were life history, contexts of realisation, structure and methodology.

In the systematisation of the life history during the study of Brouwer's work, a sample of people involved in his work were interviewed. These informants provided arguments about the development and characteristics of the composer's musical production based on experiential connections (62.5% of the interviews); in addition, three interviews conducted directly with Brouwer by third parties were used (37.5%). Books, book chapters, articles in serial publications, essays, theses, recordings, catalogues and scores were also accessed. All of this made it possible to establish priority criteria in relation to artistic characteristics and movements, taking into account the reasoning of instrumentalists, composers, orchestra conductors, musicologists and writers.

## Life history. Reflections on method

In qualitative research, life history is recognised in many ways, the range of references identifies it as a method, technique or approach. Method reflects the way in which the researcher relates to the object, which indicates that, although a set of general rules must be followed, the researcher's creativity and the conditions for its application are evident. Techniques are more specific (particular, specific) aids; a combination of several techniques can also be found in the structure of the method. The approach is perceived as the most general and constitutes the theoretical-methodological orientation of the research.

During the exploration carried out, authors were found who recognise the Life History method within the biographical method and also refer to it indistinctly as a life story (Cornejo, Mendoza and Rojas, 2008; Longa, 2010; Miguel and Castillo, 2013); based on this idea, a part or the life of the person is studied on which the story is constructed or an interpretation is made based on categories of a conceptual, temporal, thematic or areas of knowledge nature. Other authors include it in the narrative and highlight the relationship between the story and social structures, context and/or historical conditions (Veras, 2010; Hernández, 2011; Hernández, Sancho and Creus, 2011).

The research shares the position of Borboa-Quintero (2012); Naranjo and Soto (2018); and Vidanovic and Osorio (2018) who do define life history as a method. From these referents, the actions of the protagonist are synthesised from the account of the reality lived by him or her or in coexistence with others, which involves achievements, failures, emotions, events and experiences that he or she considers significant. The interviewee also offers information about collective memory, tradition, practices, beliefs, historical conditions and context.

For Vidanovic and Osorio (2018) this method enables the description of the everyday in the human being; they argue that it is aimed at the human experience. They use the term method "because life history requires an orderly way of interpreting a whole reality of life with structures, made up of connections between various elements, which represent human complexity" (p. 171).

When applying the life history method, the interview is identified as a recurrent technique for obtaining information, motivating the accounts of the subject under study; however, in many investigations, other techniques are used, such as the analysis of documents (including letters, reports, photos, videos, audios, etc.), narratives, observation, and genograms.

Its characterisation comprises accounts of a life based on interviews, conversations and reflections; association of consequences with the context (both at the time when they happened and when they are told); meaningful relationship between the researchers and the subjects who tell the story; repeated and calm reading in search of constrictions weighing on the individual or determining conditioning; and construction as a version of the story told to a researcher at a particular time or in the life of the subject being studied (Hernández, Sancho and Creus, 2011; Borboa-Quintero; 2012; Charries, 2012; Vidanovic and Osorio, 2018; Martinez and Albuquerque, 2020). One possibility offered by the Life History method is the continuity and updating of the research by taking preceding references.

In its structure, actions were identified that could be grouped into three stages: the preparatory stage, the information collection stage, and the analysis and elaboration stage, which are formed as a methodological strategy for the application of the method in music research.

The preparatory stage includes the definition of the objective; it is the theoretical preparation of the researcher; where the precision of the categories for the search for information is established; the selection of the sources; the design of the procedures and instruments; the determination of the logic of the possible encounters (including the projection of the information to be given to the subject who relates or explains how to proceed); as well as the consent of the participants, in which their commitment and motivation is sought from the slogan for carrying out the interview.

At this stage, it is important to establish a relationship of trust and respect between the interviewer and the interviewee. "No one would tell a tape recorder about their Erlebnisse, their "lived experiences". This means that the research is conceived as a co-research and that each researcher, far from being able to entrench himself behind a pre-constituted methodological armoury, is himself a "researched"" (Ferrarotti, 2007, p. 26).

The information gathering stage concentrates on conducting interviews, analysing documents or other techniques that make it possible to obtain information. In this process, consideration should be given to the context in which the event being recounted took place, as well as the time and conditions in which it took place, the characteristics of the person (age, occupation, relationship with the event or the subject under investigation, cultural level, among others) or of the document (typology, date and format of production, its objective, the type of information it contains, etc.). Likewise, the transcription of the interviews will be taken care of, which is exchanged with the interviewee in order to favour the clarification and correction of the account.

During the interview or document analysis, other aspects are usually raised that are of interest to the researcher but which are not related to the proposed objective, which is why it is important to bear in mind the categories identified for the design of the instruments, which will maintain the direction of the research, however, if deemed necessary, the designed instrument can be improved.

In the analysis and elaboration stage, the results are obtained. It is important that during the study of the interviews (of their recordings) attention is paid to the emotional reaction, the tone of voice, the words. During the review of the information, look for significant elements in each sentence or in material that may be uneven or disjointed. Nothing that is recounted is considered insignificant, as it may link events or moments in the development of the personality under study.

### **Life history in music research**

Due to its methodological structure, life history is considered a method within the qualitative approach whose function is directed towards the understanding and interpretation of phenomena, processes and/or events. This is the approach most commonly used in musical research because of the ease with which it recreates, clarifies or describes phenomena. Its rigour is discovered in the meticulous collection of information, the fidelity during its recording, the clarity and transparency of the methodological strategy developed and the presentation of evidence that gives value to the results achieved.

Life history has been used for different purposes in music research since the last century; in the last five years we have found research whose objectives cover a heterogeneous range of problems in different areas; among them: formation, impact, regional configurations, generic complexes in music, contextualisation, socialisation, temporal or socio-cultural conditioning factors, social studies, professional trajectory, contributions of recognised personalities to musical development and heritage, structuring and compilation of repertoires, and interdisciplinarity (Juan-Carvajal and Juan-Carvajal, 2014; Suárez and Escudero, 2016, Vásquez, 2020; Spencer, 2021).

One can also distinguish reflections that feed on the life stories of social actors linked to musical practices (García, 2020), or the positioning of the method as part of the Biographical, where uncritical works have been developed that tend to become "propaganda tools in relation to certain composers, certain aesthetic ideologies and certain schools of composition" (Madrid, 2021, p.22).

Other fairly widespread dimensions are the impact of context on the musician's creative development and the study of traditions based on a regional musical structure or instrumentation, which "accounts for an ethnomusicological praxis based on the formal analysis of music" (Campos, 2019, p.233).

### **Why Leo Brouwer?**

Juan Leovigildo Brouwer Mesquida "Leo Brouwer" (Havana, 1939), is an integral and avant-garde musician in the broadest conceptual sense. He is also a concert guitarist, orchestra conductor, pedagogue, researcher, music theorist and critic, artistic-cultural promoter and one of the most prolific composers of the so-called academic music. He holds the title of Doctor Honoris Causa awarded by the Universidad de las Artes de Cuba and the Universidad de Chile and is an honorary member of UNESCO, among many other honours.

His long and creative life, sharpness, perseverance and intelligence have allowed him to experiment with music, leaving a compositional legacy of folk, experimental, national and universal compositions.

In his global work, modernity, plurality and artistic and aesthetic multidisciplinary are recreated in the most varied and unlikely forms of artistic expression. He has skilfully employed the techniques, stylistics and knowledge of the traditions of a national and cosmopolitan culture, which keeps him active and predominant in the compositional, research and academic context. He is a reference of great impact among his contemporaries, but above all among young performers, composers and musicologists.

He has an extensive catalogue, heterogeneous in styles, formats and genres, as well as customised arrangements and transcriptions for many different types of ensembles, both of his own work and of international music, including popular genres. His creation can be classified as a free, recurrent and experimental style in constant development, in which national and universal values of contemporary and modern art can be appreciated in a dialectic relationship with other artistic manifestations, particularly the visual arts and cinema, but also in direct interrelation with other areas of knowledge, mainly mathematics and geometry. His still growing musical production renews conceptions and perceptions of compositional and interpretative art and reveals basic concepts of his capacity for synthesis and abstraction, as the main exponents of his language and philosophy: tradition, avant-garde, experimentation, Cubanness and universality.

As a pedagogue, he has a dossier of didactic materials for instrumentation, interpretation and composition, he revolutionised the musician's curriculum by introducing new subjects in the teaching of composition and he stood out in the exercise of specialised conferences of a didactic nature. His theoretical, methodological and musical production constitutes a valuable source for the study of avant-garde techniques in general and the knowledge of the characteristics of this and other movements of the 20th century and the present.

In short, Leo Brouwer is a universally recognised artistic personality. His study offers an insight into the surrounding reality in the field of performance, composition and music pedagogy.

In his creation there are many works that have been commissioned, for competitions, festivals, or by outstanding performers and even international orchestras of great prestige, however, the majority of his creation was made from the Cuban reality.

Our professional and continuous training as instrumentalists and pedagogues motivated the study of Leo Brouwer's contributions to culture, music and musical pedagogy. Based on the criteria of interviewees and the analysis of documents, visits were made to libraries, information centres and museums that treasure the maestro's musical production, theoretical studies, essays, memories of events, biographical studies, among others, to reveal the contributions in the musical, aesthetic and pedagogical fields, as well as the musical composition for those formats in which the bowed strings played a leading role. The search was carried out through the composer's own experiences and those of his main performers and scholars, based on the categories of compositional-evolutionary development, music for fretted strings, catalogue of works and discography. From the exploration it is evident that Brouwer's compositional and interpretative development is influenced by the context, the different personalities of music and universal art, as well as the multidisciplinary as a consequence of the cultural exchange, the communicational openness and the visualisation of his musical production at an international level.

### **Application of the life history method. Case study: Leo Brouwer**

From the point of view of Vidanovic and Osorio (2018), with life history the totality of an experience in time and space can be captured. "The life story is constituted by a network of social relations woven by the life of the human group itself, in which the researcher is interested and belongs in some way to that fabric" (p.171).

As Angulo and Noriega (2014) note, with this method it is possible to describe the changes that a person goes through, obtaining the subjective vision with which one sees oneself and others; in addition, it favours the understanding of the impact of the context on their development, "...it discovers the keys to the interpretation of many social phenomena of general and historical scope that only find an adequate explanation through the experience of specific individuals" (p.15).

These authors relate life history to the case study by arguing that the latter constitutes a system with which the individual, event or community is investigated. They emphasise that the result must be credible, so that it leaves the impression of what was experienced; that the story told stimulates curiosity, analysis, and motivates research to find out the reasons for their actions.

The combination of the two methods led to the contextualisation of Brouwer's cultural contribution and creative work, the clarification of his catalogue for bowed strings (which is of particular interest to us) and the elaboration of compilations and texts that constitute references for new research in this area of knowledge. These results were reanalysed on the basis of the categories constituted in transversal axes from which they were obtained:

- A compilation with a historical-cultural assessment of the works written for bowed strings.
- A historical-logical analysis of the compositional-evolutionary development for bowed string instruments in Cuba and its historical assessment.
- Compilation and dissemination of information on the works written mainly for the violin, viola and cello (individually or as a whole) with evaluative commentaries that facilitate their dissemination in a panoramic way or by means of recordings and their interpretative appreciation.
- A basic bibliographical source for the string instrumentalist in Cuban creation after the sixties of the last century.
- The recognition of the composer's imprint on the basis of his experience as a musician, universal performer and of his works or as an orchestra conductor.
- The conception of modernity and contemporaneity represented in Leo Brouwer's work, as well as the influence of technological development on his musical production.
- The impact of the universal artistic movements in force at a given time on the compositional development and the expression of a national culture with universal features as an identifying element in his work.

- A compilation of the discography in which the intervention of at least one stringed instrument can be distinguished.

Leo Brouwer has positioned himself and continues to advance as one of the most transcendent composers in Latin America in terms of the place occupied by his prolific production, fundamentally his compositions. His creation is representative of the 20th and 21st centuries in Cuba and internationally recognised in all its value. His merits have earned him numerous decorations and distinctions worldwide.

Among the characteristics that distinguish his creative imprint are the compositional development; the methodological expression of works for guitar recognised by music schools in Paris, Brussels, Tokyo and Toronto, among others. The technical-sound contributions are included in the world classical repertoire, whose functional sense is described by the master himself in three types: incidental music (works written for cinema and theatre), practical music (grouping creations for choirs, piano and soloists) and avant-garde music (of interest as concert music); as well as changes in compositional patterns that he enunciates as analogies to geometric forms, architectural or novelistic structures, and biological forms.

Brouwer's work describes the compositional model of his time; it embraces universal stylistic processes in a free and conscious manner, thus creating a novel and attractive artistic product. The principles of his work are a Cuban-universal style, contemporary language, social communicative intention or meaning and aesthetic value.

His technical and expressive contributions to the development of the guitar, for example, include the use of the thumb of the left hand in search of greater extension; the use of pizzicato, of percussive blows on the strings and the tops that broaden the sound and resonance possibilities of the instrument; he also experimented with the use of non-traditional tunings, the use of objects that are not proper to the instrument such as the bow or other metallic objects, etc. This consequently has repercussions on the fingering technique, on the way of bringing out the sounds and expressing sonorities, timbres and diversity of colours with an orchestral sense.

He promoted the inclusion of experimental techniques and languages in his compositions and created exchanges and spaces to disseminate the work of other Cuban composers, especially those who initially shared with him the aesthetics of the experimental avant-garde that took place in the middle of the 20th century, and the study and analysis of their main interpretations.

The result of all this was that Brouwer revolutionised views and aesthetic ideas about modernity, contemporaneity, the avant-garde, post-modernism and all the stylistic and compositional concepts present in this process. In his work, changes in aesthetic values can be appreciated, tempered to the identity characteristics of the Cuban-universal, which expressed materially could be appreciated in the use of popular rhythms and cadences that are used together with advanced and own techniques combined with some traditional elements according to the needs of expression that the works acquire.

In the pedagogical field, Brouwer made innovations to the musician's curriculum, mainly related to the teaching of the guitar and composition, as can be seen in the analysis of his work, but he has also contributed with his instructions and master classes to the universal definition of study methodologies for the resolution of technical passages, to the way of approaching and breaking down the study of a score for its learning, as well as to the understanding of the intrinsic relationship between the material and the spiritual of the work, in accordance with the visions of the performer and the composer as key figures in the interpretative process, above all, when it comes to living composers as in his case.

Brouwer has also been a professor of harmony, counterpoint and composition, a music advisor and instructor, and his pedagogical mastery has met wide recognition on several continents, in universities in Cuba, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Japan, Sweden, Brazil, the United States and Finland, among others. He has been part of or presided over juries in national and international competitions; he also stood out as a trainer of generations of laureates who dignify the cultural progress of his country and promoted the development of a basic literature for the teaching of the guitar.

The influence of the context in his training is present since his birth in a family of renowned musicians that provided a favourable environment for his inclination towards music and his first incursions into this sphere. The possibility of taking some courses and systematic exchanges in the international sphere had an impact on his musical creation where one can visualise the development of an individualisation in the aesthetic conception; the use of hybrid techniques; a practical approach that is shown in his own expressive, communicative and reflexive language; two fundamental tendencies in the general expression where one can appreciate a writing with a futuristic look (cosmic-spatial) and another where the everyday and general feelings such as joy, mockery, sadness, love, passion, etc., are identified, as well as the exploitation of timbres and the use of timbres to express the music, as well as the exploitation of more related timbres and sonorities in the conformation of the ensembles.

### **Conclusions**

The study of various sources related to musical research and the use of general methods applicable to qualitative research revealed the stages for the use of the life history method in musical research: preparatory, collection of information, and analysis and elaboration.

The combination of life history and case study as methods for musical research favoured the constant alignment of the research with the objectives where, taking into consideration the categories compositional-evolutionary development, music for bowed strings and catalogue of works and discography, the characteristic aspects of Leo Brouwer's composition and the impact of the context on his work stand out.

Life history as a method is feasible to apply in musical research. From the instruments designed for its implementation, results are obtained that favour the understanding of the development of a subject or phenomenon in this area of knowledge. In its application, the direction of the research should be watched over carefully, avoiding propaganda. For this purpose, a new reading is recommended, taking into account the categories identified during the preparatory stage.

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