

IS ANYBODY LISTENING? CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN COMPOSERS' SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN TIMES OF PRECARIOUSNESS AND MULTIPLE EXCLUSIONS IN THE CLASSICAL MUSIC SECTOR.

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at intersectional discriminatory practices within the Western classical music sector, with a specific focus on contemporary Mexican composers. It addresses common challenges such as precarious working conditions, lack of diversity in concert programming and other forms of oppression partly arising from the field's lasting Euro- and US-centric tendencies, all of which often place a particular burden on women.

The presentation is based on an interdisciplinary methodology, mainly bringing together arts management, cultural policy studies and musicology. Moreover, it draws from pre-existing conversations and in-depth interviews with contemporary Mexican composers at different stages of their career.

The issues addressed are vast and complex, wherefore only preliminary findings will be presented. Nevertheless, the paper not only illustrates many hurdles to be urgently addressed by policy measures, but also multiple (self-management) strategies composers have used to navigate them.

Keywords: Western classical music; composers; Mexico; Exclusion; Diversity.

Introduction

Over the past years, several studies and reports (e.g. Donne 2022; Lázaro, 2024; Newton 2022) have highlighted the lack of diversity in concert programming, with most Western classical music performed written by (dead) male European composers. This paper presents reflections on, as well as experiences of non-diverse programming and other (intersectional) exclusionary practices by contemporary Mexican composers, with a special, albeit not sole, focus on female creators. It also reveals how some composers achieve professional survival through self-management measures, and shares policy interventions they recommend in order to improve current conditions.

The paper will be structured in the following manner. The first section will provide a brief overview of relevant literature and statistics. This will be followed by a discussion of the methodology deployed, and interviews analysed. The conclusion will summarise findings, and present suggestions for improving the current situation by some contemporary Mexican composers, and managerial voices from the music world.

A glance at the context

There is a rich literature on (self-identified) women composers. This includes analyses of the multiple social and psychological obstacles many female creators have faced throughout recorded musical history (e.g. Claudia Chibici-Revneanu, 2013), their systemic exclusion from musical canons (e.g. Citron, 2000) and countless works focused on the recovery of extant biographies and works, among many other issues. There has been a realisation, however, that much of this research has focused on marginalised European and US composers, and that a more intersectional approach is urgently needed (see, for instance, Duguay, 2023; Luong and Myers,

2021).

This is not news in Mexico, and the country has its own history of research into questions of gender and music (e.g. García Bonilla, 2001; Meierovich, 2001; Vilar-Payá, 2010). The latter has, however, not yet received the attention it deserves, especially within the English-speaking world. Long before the first wave of interest by European and US scholars, the Mexican musicologist Esperanza Pulido wrote an analysis of Mexican women in music from the pre-Columbian era to her present. The 1958 publication of her *La mujer Mexicana en la música* was followed by an English article with the same title (“Mexican women in music”) which pointed towards a common double oppression for female creators of sound – that of sexism and “malinchismo”, a Mexican term used to describe a preference for all things foreign (especially with regard to the so-called Global North [Pulido, 1983, 120]). Like many scholars on Western classical music in Mexico to follow (e.g. Piñero Gil 2020; Bitrán Goren, 2017) she was already aware of intersectional forces of discrimination at work within the field.

Unfortunately, the impact of this wealth of existing research has been limited (Macarthur, 2010), with music textbooks, syllabi or concert programmes – to name only a few examples – perpetuating an androcentric focus within the field (e.g. Baker, 2003; Lam, 2018). Moreover, McArthur et. al have observed waves of interest in women composers, with previous “recoveries” and initiatives often repeatedly submerged into oblivion – albeit many have of course retained their efforts over the decades (Macarthur, Bennett, Goh, Hennekam, and Hope, 2017). Indeed, like other aspects of gender inequality in the cultural sector, the issue of historical and contemporary women composers’ marginalisation keeps arising and being shut off, partly due to multiple resistances (Klein and Koweindl, 2009).

These resistances can arguably also be found within the field of cultural policy. Although initiatives such as the Austrian “speed-dating policy” for contemporary women composers, or the international keychange project dedicated to underrepresented genders do exist, they have been relatively scarce. This is striking, especially given the extent of the problem and repeated calls for increased cultural policy attention to gender inequalities (e.g. UNESCO, 2022).

Luckily, there is now a renewed interest in matters of gender and other forms of exclusions within classical music, including studies from the music management sector (e.g. Newton, 2022; League of American Orchestras, 2024). Projects such as the yearly Donne report on concert programming have also stressed and expanded upon what Pulido signalled almost half a century ago. Factors such as gender, “race”, sexual orientation, or indeed being “alive” can intersectionally discriminate against composers. A recent report which collected programming data from 111 orchestras around the world during the 2021-2022 Orchestra season showed that works by dead white men were by far the most performed (76.4 %) (Donne, 2023, 13).

It is worth pausing to look at more of the report’s findings. Living white men (11.3 %) – followed by living white women (3.8 %) – occupied the second and third place with regard to performance space. Next in the line are “Global Majority Men” (e.g. men who are not usually considered “white”), with those dead being played 2.3 %, and those alive 2.2 % of the time. Only now do we find Historical White Women (1.8 % - a striking contrast to their historical male counterpart) and, subsequently, Living Global Majority Women (1.7%). And so the list goes on, with minute percentages assigned to “Historical Global Majority Women” (0.4 %) and 0 % granted to “Living White Nonbinary, Living Global Majority Nonbinary and Living Unknown Gender” (ibid, 13).

The interpretation of this data is not straightforward. It is, for instance, hard to pin down the exact number of works produced by each “group”, to get a proportional sense of who is being ignored. Moreover, women and men have not faced the same conditions for musical production, and the same may be said for many “Global Majority Men”, non-binary creators and people who have found themselves at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Despite this, the existent repertoire of marginalised composers is vast, as many resources such as the Composer Diversity Database, Latin Orchestral Music, the African Diaspora Music Project (Wiprud, 2022, 14), or “The Big List” presented by Donne itself illustrate.

Another difficulty associated with the report can be found in the slippery nature of the categories deployed. There is no separate counting of intersex composers, for example, and socially constructed categories of “race” vary across geographical and cultural contexts. This is especially relevant to Mexican creators of music. A person may well be perceived as “white” within a Mexican context, yet becoming what the report calls “Global Majority” when crossing a border. Indeed, a “mestizo” (“mixed-race, the country’s supposed majority) Mexican is likely to be assigned to the same category as people from varying indigenous backgrounds who have often

been the specific target of structural Mexican racism. Despite these limits, it is hard to deny the striking inequalities the report reveals.

Turning specifically to Mexico, one does not find such a different picture. A recent review of the Mexican concert scene analysed the programming of 9 prestigious Mexican Symphony orchestras during the second half of 2023 (Lázaro. 2024). In this case, the report looks at aspects such as composers' gender, country/continent of origin, again if they are dead or alive, and – in case of the latter – if they are above or younger than forty. Again, the data obtained is not very encouraging. Five of the nine orchestras analysed performed no music written by women at all, and the total of female composers only amounts to 16 (vs. 188 men), with no representation of musical creators of other genders. A total of 26 pieces by living composers are listed, and only three of them are younger than forty (id.). The report does not specify whether the living composers programmed are Mexican, male or female, so seven programmes which were still available were revised for the present study. This revealed that a total of 19 pieces by 18 living male Mexicans were played, as opposed to only 5 by women of the same category.

This is not to say that all programming necessarily follows these trends, and further studies need to look at chamber music or solo performance statistic. After all, many “orchestras were founded largely to exalt “European ‘classical’ music”, where “the contributions of non-white and women composers...have been mostly ignored until relatively recently” (2022, 163). Evidently, Mexican orchestras have also tended towards celebrating Mexican music, but this has not exempted them from otherwise Eurocentric (and patriarchal) tendencies.

The interviews

What then do some individual Mexican composers think of the contemporary scene of classical music? To tentatively answer this question, the paper looked at ten pre-existent interviews with contemporary Mexican composers (five men and five women). This was motivated by the (largely unheeded) wealth of relatively recent material on significant figures who could not be easily accessed by the author. As these pre-produced sources do not explicitly focus on matters here discussed, six further interviews were conducted, again with an equal number of men and women.

Interviewees were selected both through criteria of personal accessibility and the variety of their trajectories, with some at already eminent creators and others at the beginning of their careers, although all have achieved some form of “external” recognition such as winning prizes and having their music performed. The interviews were semi-structured, relying both on a prepared questionnaire and allowing for flexibility with regard to arising issues of relevance. Composers studied through existing conversations were Leticia Armijo, Eduardo Caballero, Alejandro Escuer, Alejandro Gómez, Ana Lara, Gabriela Ortiz, Alejandro Padilla, Hilda Paredes, Víctor Rasgado and Tania Rubio. Additional interviews were conducted with Rodrigo Cordera, Osmar Esquivel Morales, Oliver López, Nonis Prado, Ana Paola Santillán and Nur Slim.¹

The composers spoke about many issues such as their creative processes, achievements they are most proud of, their musical language(s), love for music, the way it helped them to comprehend the human condition and the desire to create social change through the sounds they produce. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of this paper, the discussion to follow will only focus on aspects such as multiple exclusions in programming and beyond, difficult working conditions and the way these are managed by creators interviewed.

Programming

The matter of programming – especially by symphony orchestras and opera companies – was repeatedly addressed, mostly without prompting. Some considered having a “large” work performed a “crowning achievement.” Ana Lara observes that “for composers to have their work [performed] by an orchestra is the best thing that can happen to you” (2022, min. 8:09), and Ana Paola Santillán shares that one of the best moments of her career was when her first orchestral piece was played in one of Mexico’s most prestigious venues, the Palacio de Bellas Artes in

¹ Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide a detailed review of individual biographies, but interested readers will find a wealth of information on most creators mentioned on the internet.

Mexico City (Personal Interview, 2024).² For others, this is an important career aspiration – yet one that is difficult to realise. Nur Slim admits to her partial desire of “being performed by an orchestra...and this is a challenge I have not yet achieved,” because “Mexican orchestras don’t want to play my music” (Personal Interview, 2024). And Leticia Armijo believes she will obtain her death certificate before her opera work be performed (2023, 30:50).

In harmony with Lázaro’s report, Slim thinks her age might be a reason for this. For she has “this friend, a composer...and only now that he is 48, they played his music in OFUNAM” (Personal Interview 2024) – a prestigious orchestra of the National Autonomous Mexican University, also included in the report. However, she believes there might be other, intersectional forms of discrimination at work, as “they are hardly programming any Mexicans, and women even less” (id).

A common exclusion of Mexican and/or female composers is signalled on several occasions. Gabriela Ortiz states that, at the time of her interview, no large Mexican opera had been performed by a professional national company “for thirty years,” which has left a “brutal emptiness” (2021, 35:57). Armijo recounts that she was told to reduce her opera, in order to increase the likelihood of having it performed, something she believes would not be asked of male composers (2022).

Unsurprisingly, given these circumstances, some younger (female) composers such as Nonis Prado are discouraged from writing “larger works.” As she explains, with specific reference to her student days: “if I write a piece for orchestra, I am going to learn, but the chances of it being played...are tiny.” She thus prefers to create other pieces, such as chamber music which are far more likely to be performed (Personal Interview, 2024).

No to tokenism

Nevertheless, several women composers interviewed expressed considerable reticence towards “women only” events, explicit gender quotas – and the way these are executed. Santillán reflects that programmes should always contain an equal amount of female and male composers, wherefore she is against “all women” concerts (Personal Interview, 2024). Nur Slim is weary of tokenism and the practice of showcasing women’s music only on dates surrounding “International Women’s Day”:

I just get the feeling that when it’s the 8th of March, or when it’s March, you see all these “women programmes” and they invite you everywhere, and the truth is that I almost don’t go to these things, because it bothers me, you see? Because...I work all year around and... I don’t need you to put on a special programme because I’m a woman or because I’m a monkey (Personal Interview, 2024).

As a result, she only attends special events in March “if it’s something real where I think my participation can be important” (id.)

With reference to quotas, Gabriela Ortiz dislikes the idea of being programmed because she is a woman – and/or, as the following quote illustrates, Mexican/Latin American:

I think it’s terrible that they exclude you for being Mexican, for being Latin American, but I also think it’s terrible that they include you just for the fact that you are Mexican woman...Because I don’t want this either, oh well, there’s a quota, we are going to programme these composers because they are Latin American and we are going to give them the opportunity, it also seems to me a bit protectionist and wrong, that is to say it has to be balanced and opportunities have to be opened up, because the music of...living composers...is worth it (2021, 48:02-48:48).

Indeed, Slim points towards discriminatory practices based on others’ belief that she was given a career opportunity due to a gender quota:

I don’t want this to become a battle, men against women, on the contrary, I want to promote respect among humans, education...not pay attention to gender quotas. Sometimes, when I obtain results, I think it is because I have been studying for years,

² All translations from Spanish are mine.

because I have been working for years and never because they had to comply with a gender quota. Because...I always tell them, put my CV next to anyone's and it will be larger because I study and work so much (Personal Interviews 2024).

As this quote indicates, struggles with discriminatory practices also go beyond matters of programming, although they may ultimately manifest with regard to it. Some of these will be addressed in the next section.

Multiple forms of exclusion

Sticking to the matter of sexism, there are some ambiguities worth highlighting. Santillán, for instance, shares that she has never personally experienced any form of sexism and that, if anything, being a woman has opened some doors for her: “I feel like it has made some things easier, like taking some course or getting a scholarship” (Personal Interview, 2024).

Others feel that things are improving in terms of gender equality – at least for younger generations. According to Lara, there is “this young generation of women composers who are doing very interesting things and being recognised by institutions which we would never have had access to at their age and this is fabulous” (2022, 20:52-21:36). Hilda Paredes says she is “learning a lot from young women composers and how they defend things which I accepted from the beginning, thinking they were normal” (2021, 58:32-58:43). And Tania Rubio speaks in detail about a sense of progress for women – in music and beyond:

I think that this opportunity we now have as women composers is one which has not existed in any previous time in history and I celebrate this...I do see very important achievements, the fact that as a woman I cannot only dedicate myself to composing but also have the opportunity to travel and live off composing and express myself like I am doing now (2022, 1:08:46-1:09:06).

Despite this sense of progress, all composers who address the issue of sexism agree that it continues to be a problem. Although she herself has so far been spared from discriminatory practices, Santillán emphasises: “I am aware that they exist, obviously. Of course, they exist, and I know that many have suffered from them” (Personal Interview, 2024). And Nonis Prado thinks that sexism “exists on all levels” within the musical field, “I have observed it since I was a BA student” (Personal Interview, 2024). Similarly, Leticia Armijo narrates that she “experienced discrimination in the National School of Music by professors who told me ‘you know that you cannot compose a string quartet because women do not compose’...I experienced a lot of harassment in the National School of Music” (2023, 29:31-29:40). She believes many Mexican women composers “have been victims of an intellectual feminicide which should also be considered a crime” (2023, 30:01-30:05).

The lasting bias against women composers – and some of its destructive repercussions – are also addressed by Slim:

in the end it's hard for them to believe that we also have that capacity [to compose], it's still like they think that women musicians are less than men... it's still in a very rigid period within classical music, and orchestras specifically... Because of that I've been twice as disciplined, twice as studious, worked twice as hard at everything... Maybe because I had to do and study more and demonstrate more and demonstrate more, more, more, more?

It is striking how often Slim repeats the word “more” to emphasise how much she has been forced to struggle to in the face of existing gender prejudice.

And, as implied, there are other (intersecting) discriminatory practices. Added to musical eurocentrism, there is – for instance – a problem of musical centralisation in Mexico which two composers speak out against. Oliver López refers to the “essential necessity to strengthen musical education in spaces outside of Mexico City” (Personal Interview, 2024), and Eduardo Caballero pleads for the social recognition of the fact that “there are good composers everywhere and good musical things are done all over Mexico” (2022, 23:17-23:24).

Class privilege and limited access to education are other issues highlighted on several occasions. López points towards discrimination suffered by those who have not had access to a musical

education in a prestigious institution and the demotivating effects of this exclusion (Personal Interview, 2024). And, according to the composer turned politician, Rodrigo Cordera:

Many young people who are talented and want to study composition...think twice because there is no secure future...you have to either have contacts to get jobs or be extremely talented, but there are also very talented people who never get to be heard...it's for a small percentage of the population, mainly people from the middle and upper classes, which I don't see as a bad thing, but how many talented people with limited resources are we missing out on? I do see becoming a composer as a class privilege and I don't think that's fair (Personal Interview, 2024).

Interestingly, Cordera also stresses the struggles of those privileged enough to follow a career as a composer. On the one hand, he “had the good fortune to work in the radio as a music programmer”, which provided him with “a fixed income not everyone has (Personal Interview, 2024).

And yet, despite all these advantages:

I didn't have access to social security unless I paid for it, so, well, I didn't pay for it, if I got sick I would have had to go to a private hospital and pay with my savings, luckily this did not happen...even though I had a fixed salary...sometimes they paid me every three months and then how would I pay the rent for those three months ...so I never had any kind of financial stability (id.).

This leads to the next subject frequently mentioned by interviewees – difficult working conditions.

Money matters

The idea of supporting themselves economically through their art seems to be another key ambition of many composers. As Alejandro Gomez puts it: “Every composer hopes to be performed. And, if possible, live off composing” (2022, 4:20-4:32).

Again, however, this aim appears nearly impossible to obtain. The majority of composers interviewed rely on other sources of income such as teaching, working on the radio – as mentioned – or as orchestra directors. While most do not seem to dislike these activities, they do take their toll. Santillán considers herself very fortunate about her career as a composer, yet recounts:

You have to be 100 percent dedicated ... if you want to excel...and part of this sacrifice, it involves a lot of things...there are no holidays, you take a course, you're composing...you have to find a way to live too, right? And I mean, fortunately I've done well, in this aspect, teaching and everything...I really enjoy it, but obviously I get tired (Personal Interview, 2024).

And it is not surprising that she gets tired, given that she sometimes finishes teaching at 10 pm, then works on her compositions, only getting in a few hours of sleep before her next intense day begins (id.).

For others, the fact that they have several jobs does not actually leave them enough time to compose – a vicious circle that is hard to break. Prado comments that “in order to really live off composing, I think you have to fully dedicate yourself to it, you know...when they commission your work, well, they pay you, but to get a commission you already have to have a name, be famous, be someone. And to be someone, well, you have to compose and compose and compose” (Personal Interview, 2024).

Scholarships seem to be regarded by some as one way out of this. As Osmar Esquivel Morales shares: “I am currently working on several projects, so I don't have much time [to compose]...really my income is mostly related to my work as a music teacher, an orchestra director....In fact, this year I think I applied for all available scholarships” (Personal Interview, 2024).

Things, then, are not easy for contemporary Mexican composers. Even though Mexico has a flourishing contemporary classical music scene, many of its musical creators struggle with multiple forms of exclusion and oppression, both in terms of recognition and economic retribution (Fraser, 1995). Both are also related to larger systems which perpetuate financial, gender, “racial” and many other forms of injustice, in Mexico and beyond. Most seem to push through because of their love for music – it is striking how many consider themselves lucky despite many difficulties they face – and yet not all stick to musical creation under such dire conditions.

Conclusion

This presentation thus looked at many difficulties faced by some contemporary Mexican composers. These include struggles to have their works heard, as well as the precariousness of their careers, the need to hold down multiple jobs to pay the rent, to sacrifice rest, social security and often end up without enough time to compose. What actions can be taken to improve the current situation? Many composers have personally addressed this issue and taken initiatives to intervene.

Several creators are, for instance, convinced that self-management skills are essential for successfully navigating these conditions. Slim talks about her work experience at OCESA, a massive player in the Mexican music industry and the important lessons she learned there:

I was the musical director of a pop singer called María José...and I learned a lot from that big business, right? As a manager, I had to organise concerts, the music, musicians, call them, schedules, all those things... it was a great way to learn all about self-management...I mean, I don't have the money OCESA has, but within my possibilities, little by little, I have to do it... Every time I have money, I know I have to pay the musicians, advertise via social media... Well I've got about seven jobs and I'm composing at the same time (Personal Interview, 2024).

Not everyone has access to such experiences, however, which is why Slim believes music degrees – especially public ones – need to include lessons focused on management skills (id.). Eduardo Cabellero agrees and stresses that money is:

what we talk about the least, we talk about technique, we talk about music, we talk about processes, but we talk about many things...but we hardly talk about how you can live or try to live...money is not talked about. It is a very important area that should be included in everyone's training (2022, 9:12-9:37).

Apart from self-management skills, there is also a sense that some composers need to find a way to better connect to audiences. According to Alejandro Padilla: “I believe we have turned into this...we make music for a group of musicians, not those from conservatories or concert musicians, but composers from among a small group” (2022, 25:33-25:45).

But there is also a sense that supposedly “inaccessible” pieces need to be talked about and performed to get audiences to appreciate them. Lara has dedicated parts of her career to promoting contemporary music on the radio. But she also believes it is up to orchestras to “program Mexican music so people can become familiar with it” (2022, 10: 41-10:44).

For this public funding is an absolute necessity. As the recently deceased Victor Rasgado states with specific reference to contemporary Mexican operas:

you need support to stage an opera...it's a large investment, it's not easy to see it as a business, especially if we talk about new works, Mexican works...then it's even more complex, obviously...for culture of this type you need constant government support and confidence, faith in composers, in the artists, the singers...and this is sometimes lacking (2022, 32:33-34:28).

So not everything can be solved through self-management skills, on the contrary. Much systemic change is needed. Given the potentially crucial significance of scholarships, Rodrigo Cordera thinks more should be made available. Also, he believes more money needs to be invested in culture as a human right – and Nonis Prado seems to agree: “I don't think culture is a priority of

the government, and perhaps not even people” (Personal Interview, 2024). Ultimately, according to Alejandro Padilla, a certain lack of interest in culture needs to be addressed by more economic equality in general (2022).

These are large and complicated issues. And while the composers presented mainly focused on individual, educational and governmental initiatives to improve current conditions, the question remains how cultural managers may play their part. As implied, several publications have provided guidelines for this, especially with regard to more inclusionary programming. In many cases, the journey will have to begin with rigorous self-examination. Most people have internalised multiple oppressive systems and normalised them to an extent that many individuals (including music managers) are often “perpetuating...exclusionary practices” and “not even aware of their actions.” (Newton, 2022, 167). And it is not just one’s actions that need to be reviewed – deep-seated biases have to be questioned.

One sign of persistent prejudice is the notion that increased diversity will lower quality. This often reveals a belief that musical excellence can almost exclusively be found among dead, white, males – an essentially racist and sexist “fallacy about compromising excellence” which “needs to be left on the side” (Martineau, quoted in Wiprud et al. 2022, 13).

Then, it may be worth starting small – for instance including one composer from a previously underrepresented group per concert – while carefully avoiding tokenism. According to the *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Artistic Planning: Catalyst Guide* by the League of American Orchestras:

One model for more inclusive programming is to set measurable targets for historically excluded composers and guest artists, and chart progress toward a more representative repertory. A target may for instance be at least one work by a BIPOC composer on every concert. This approach provides accountability and can show fast results. However, it signals tokenism if not backed up by organization-wide work to effectively engage audiences and by a commitment to center increasingly substantial works by historically excluded composers within mainstage programming (Wiprud et al., 2022, 8).

Extra resources may have to be mobilised to obtain, engage with and perform unfamiliar repertoire (ibid, 14). These tasks could be seen as an exciting challenge, however, and even become part of an arts’ organization’s “innovative” brand (ibid., 12). The guide stresses that the idea that new repertoire equals financial loss is often “exaggerated” and “many orchestras have developed successful strategies for balancing the familiar and unfamiliar, the accessible and the challenging,” often obtaining “a longer-term benefit in reaching broader audiences” (ibid, 13).

And it is not just Mexican institutions which give more presence to national composers. Ortiz considers it an international imperative to programme – and generally engage with– far more Latin American composers (of all genders). She speaks out against lasting Eurocentrism in the sphere of Western classical music (“what was done, as well as the future of music, was dictated by Europeans”) and worries that “in Europe nobody is interested in studying what happens in Latin America, we are not on their agendas, we are not on their school curricula (2021, 49:08-50:49).

And while Europe is certainly not devoid of people interested in classical Latin American music, there does seem to be a discernible colonial influence on whose compositions are considered important. This, like sexism and other systems of oppression, should not necessarily be fought through quotas, however, but through cultural players’ willingness to expand their knowledge and discover diverse music repertoires (Ortiz, 2021).

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