Ugnayan on the Air and the Rhetoric of Martial Law[1]

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Thank you very much for inviting me to this event dubbed "Atmospheres: Ugnayan @ 50", which commemorates and re-stages the ground-breaking composition and production concept of National Artist for Music Jose Maceda.[2] As we all know, this year marks the 50th anniversary of the premiere of Ugnayan, aired on radio on New Year's Day of 1974. That it was broadcast simultaneously on 20 radio stations, plus 17 backup stations, is what makes it interesting to scholars studying the history and practice of broadcasting in the Philippines. Each of the 37 principal stations aired one of the 20 layers of Maceda's opus, heard fully or partially by communities who physically came together with their transistor or portable radios tuned in to the different stations, so that they would experience a composite of the sonic layers of the piece. Even today, this production concept remains novel and unique.

Based on the materials that the UP Center for Ethnomusicology generously shared with me, almost all the stations that participated were Manila-based, with transmitting power ranging from one to 50 kilowatts, which should have been enough to cover the archipelago. But, given the inequality of the transmitting power of the participating stations, it may be presumed that some groups, particularly those outside Metro Manila, may not have heard all the 20 layers, with the number probably reduced further for those in the Visayas and Mindanao. It was perhaps difficult to make sense of it if one listened to only one or two layers of the performance. But Maceda did not see this as an issue, who wrote that the more radio sets tuned in to the different stations in every listening center, the denser the music, but it was also possible to experience the performance even with just one or a few sets (Maceda 1974).

At the Rizal Park, a young Felipe de Leon Jr, a former student of Maceda and later himself a composer, scholar, and cultural administrator, brought one radio with him, and as he moved to different places all over the Luneta grounds, he heard different combinations, since different groups were asked to tune in to different stations. I understand that he said it was a glorious experience (Sarabia 2024). Given the involvement of people who numbered, according to one estimate, from 15 thousand to 35 thousand per center like the one at the Rizal Park, the event was described as an "imaginative approach to social solidarity as well as a remarkable musical

[1] Presented at ATMOSPHERES: UGNAYAN @ 50, Talks, 3 May 2024. Atmospheres: Ugnayan @ 50 is presented by the University of the Philippines Center for Ethnomusicology in cooperation with the Music Education Department of the UP College of Music, through the support of the the UP Diliman Office for Initiatives in Culture and the Arts as part of the UP Diliman Arts & Culture Festival 2024, "Pamamalagi at Pamamahagi."

[2] Atmospheres Artistic Director Dr. Dayang Magdalena Nirvana T. Yraola relates that "Atmospheres" was the original title Dr. Maceda gave his composition. However, the title "Ugnayan" was chosen by then First Lady Imelda Marcos, who sponsored the production, as it fit the propaganda's motto of building a new society, which the regime called Bagong Lipunan.

experiment" (Orosa 1974). Presumably, on top of the broadcast, the sounds produced by the people gathered, such as their conversations, created complexities that were expected to be part of the community integration through music.

However, art writer and critic Rosalinda Orosa (1974) wrote that the audience response was almost apathetic, or pathetic. She said this was because Ugnayan was visionary and ultra-sophisticated in concept, so it was beyond the comprehension of the masses, who were not acquainted with indigenous instruments. She explained, because the music was strange and new to them, the audience seemed puzzled and confused, and failed to applaud (*Daily Express, Bulletin Today, Times Journal* 1974). She also wrote that anywhere between two to 20 million heard the broadcast. As a broadcast historian, I have some questions to which I did not find answers in the materials I examined for this presentation.

For example, where and how far were the signals heard? It should be noted that all broadcast studios had a facility for live simulcast of mandated programs on all radio and television stations during martial law. This system involved just one order from Malacañang, and all broadcast stations had to turn on the switch to go into a nationwide simulcast. Was this used for Ugnayan?

Another question: How were the numbers 15 to 35 thousand and two to 20 million extrapolated? To answer this, I would look for comments from those who assembled in plazas, parks, church patios, and school campuses with their battery-operated transistor radios to amalgamate the signals from 20 radio stations, each playing a component of the composition, and each component a unique composition that combined into a massive symphony.

The experiment was also described as an attempt to forge a new music scene in the country, with tribal chants, folk tunes, indigenous instruments, and ethnic music. Was there evidence that the forging of this new music scene through radio happened? What were the indicators?

But the answers to those questions are perhaps for another occasion. This afternoon I was invited to talk about radio during the time of the premiere of Ugnayan, which, needless to stress, was the time of martial law. This perhaps explains the line in the invitation that I received, which says that this commemorative project "aims to unburden the piece UGNAYAN from the stigma of being part of the Marcos propaganda, by bringing it back within the discourse of community in performance, or performing a community, which is more congruent with Maceda's composition practice." So let me summarize the conditions radio broadcasting, as well as all media, operated in during this period.

Control of the media was one of the cornerstones of the martial law regime of the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos.[3] The dictator knew how critical it was to restrict information in order to mold and manipulate public consciousness. It was clear to him that this was one of the keys to the success of the authoritarian rule he was putting in place – the production of a submissive, acquiescent population. This is evidenced by his opening salvo when he made known on September 23, 1972 that two days earlier, he issued Proclamation 1081, the instrument he signed to declare martial law. That morning, a Saturday, people awoke to the puzzling silence of broadcast radio, the ominous absence of television images, and the menacing disappearance of the daily newspapers.

The impact was immediate and visceral, of the disappearance of broadcast signals more than the print media, given the foreboding absence of the sounds and moving pictures that saturated people's surroundings when starting their day. It was thus the most direct and instantaneous sign that a major shift in the lives of Filipinos had begun. On the other hand, radio and television were also the means by which Marcos, later at 7:15 in the evening of that day, addressed the country via nationwide broadcast on television Channel 9, owned by one of his allies, and government radio station DZRP, to announce that he had placed the entire country under military rule "to prevent the violent overthrow of the government by a foreign-backed Communist insurgency" and, in his words, "to save the Republic and reform society" (*Philippines Sunday Express* 1972).

Among his orders that included the banning of rallies and demonstrations, the temporary prohibition of travel abroad of Filipinos, the one-week suspension of classes at all levels, and the imposition of a midnight-to-dawn curfew, was the closure of all media outlets. The exceptions were government station DZRP, which had always been under Malacañang control, and Channel 9 and the broadsheet *Philippines Daily Express*, both owned by Marcos crony Roberto Benedicto. Indeed, military forces padlocked radio and TV studios and transmitter sites as well as newspaper editorial offices, in some instances violently, throughout the country during the previous night, which explains the media blackout on September 23. The following morning, the *Philippines Sunday Express* detailed to the reading public the startling events of the previous day, albeit carefully framing the news stories from Malacañang's point of view.

As a University of the Philippines journalism student who had then already begun a career in radio, I as well as my colleagues in broadcasting, suddenly out of a job, felt that the suppression of the media was the most unequivocal indication of the drastic transformation in the social and political conditions in the country that began to unfold on that day.

Since Congress was not in session, it could not go back to a padlocked Congress building to undo what Marcos did. On September 22, 1972, he issued Letter of Instruction No. 1, which ordered the closure of all media outlets all over the country: 292 radio stations, seven TV

[3] The discussion of the media during martial law quotes from an earlier paper of the author, "Control and Resistances in Broadcasting During Marcos's Martial Law," in Ferdinand C. Llanes, ed., *The Marcos Years: The Age of Crisis and Repression*, SAMASA, 2023.

stations, seven major English dailies, 11 English weekly magazines, 66 community newspapers, three Filipino dailies, one English-Filipino daily, one Spanish daily, and four Chinese dailies (Adel 2015). The obvious exceptions were Benedicto's Channel 9, its radio stations, the *Philippines Daily Express,* and the government radio DZRP.

Late that evening, constabulary troops descended on media establishments, ejected everyone who was still at work, padlocked the facilities, and stationed guards by the entrances. In some cases, the military takeover of broadcast stations was violent. The transmitters of Radio Veritas in Malolos, Bulacan were smashed with clubs by a truckload of what producer-director Fr. James Reuter, S.J. described as goons (Avecilla and Guieb 2017). Student announcer Rowena Daroy reported at dawn to sign on for radio station DZUP in the Palma Hall of the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City but was greeted by men in black masks who seized her long-playing music albums, entered the studio with her, inspected the cassette tapes, asked if she had Dovie Beams tapes,[4] and then hacked and destroyed DZUP's equipment (Daro-Morales 2019). Inside the Iglesia Ni Cristo compound on Commonwealth Avenue in Diliman, Quezon City, a firefight ensued between the military, who aggressively demanded to enter the premises to padlock the religious group's radio station DZEM, and the church's security personnel, 12 of whom were reportedly killed (Adel 2015).

In the same evening, Marcos had all his critics arrested and thrown in jail, including those in the media. He was going to control not only political power but the media as well, which is critical to political power. So in one fell swoop, he successfully concentrated all state authority in himself. To make it absolute, he also effectively muted the once vibrant Philippine media.

On November 2, 1972, prior to the re-opening of broadcast operations in the country, Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 36, ordering, among others, the cancellation of all broadcast franchises and permits, the creation of the Mass Media Council (MMC) headed by the Secretary of Public Information as chair and co-chaired by the Secretary of National Defense, and the allocation of space and time in all media outlets for information emanating from government. The MMC, most of whose members were military officers, was tasked with processing applications for permits to operate a broadcast media or telecommunications facility. The approval, called a certificate of authority, which was good for no more than six months instead of the 25-year Congressional franchise prior to martial rule, had to come from Marcos himself, with his signature. Television and radio stations, under the guidance of the Department of Public Information, were required to carry regular simulcasts of government programs on "agricultural production, consumers' prices index, general government and such other subjects of vital concern to the public" (Marcos 1972). With Congress abolished, Marcos regulated the broadcast media, all media, himself.

[4] DZUP famously aired an audio recording of Marcos singing Pamulinawen to American actress Dovie Beams and having sex with her. Beams claimed at a press conference that she made the recordings herself (Hermie Rotea, *Marcos' Lovey Dovie*, Liberty Pub. Co., 1983). Pamulinawen is an Ilocano folk song. It is the name of the lady to whom a man sings. One of Marcos' nicknames is The Great Ilocano, having hailed from Ilocos Norte.

Outside of Presidential Decree No. 36, there were no formal written guidelines on what could not be aired or printed. It was through practice that media practitioners, particularly those in news and public affairs, internalized what was permissible. Besides, with some former media colleagues in jail, on the run, self-exiled abroad, up in the hills, or disappeared, those who decided to stick it out in media had to quickly learn how to follow a new script and survive a different yet disquieting state of affairs.

Everyone quickly learned the unwritten guidelines of broadcasting under martial rule and engaged in the worst form of censorship: self-censorship. That everyone was under surveillance was taken for granted, even in entertainment programming. Manila Broadcasting Company (MBC) president Ruperto Nicdao Jr. relates that producers, directors, and scriptwriters of soap operas avoided narratives that dealt with political issues and kept to the safe storylines of love, fantasy, and horror. At MBC's flagship station DZRH, where soaps have always been a big mainstay, writers were careful not to write anything that might be construed as criticism of government (Nicdao 2018).

Criticized in and out of the country for muzzling the press, Marcos attempted to create an image of a self-regulating media under martial law and, thus, the illusion of press freedom. Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 191 on May 11, 1973, replacing the MMC with the Media Advisory Council (MAC). With more civilian members than the MMC, the MAC was presumed to erase the impression that the military was in charge of media regulation. However, the body continued to issue permits for the operation of media organizations in the country, and again subject to Marcos's approval (Marcos 1973).

A year and a half later, on November 9, 1974, Marcos abolished the MAC through Presidential Decree No. 576, and transferred its powers to two bodies – the Philippine Council for Print Media (PCPM) and the Broadcast Media Council (BMC), the members of which were mostly media practitioners. The move was meant to create the perception that under martial law, the media in the Philippines self-regulate instead of being subjected to state regulation. But it was a charade. All media organizations were required to be registered with either the PCPM or the BMC, and the two agencies continued to exercise the power to suspend or cancel the permits to operate of those that did not adhere to the strict guidelines against printing or broadcasting materials that go against what Marcos called the New Society (Marcos 1974).

Interestingly, two weeks before the creation of the MAC, on April 27, 1973, just seven months after the declaration of martial law, 19 broadcast companies organized themselves into the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP, Organization of Broadcasters in the Philippines). Within a few months, all radio and television broadcast stations in the country became members. The KBP's avowed objective was self-regulation and to promote professional and ethical standards among its ranks.

What makes these events significant was the very close working relationship between the BMC and the KBP, such that the purported independence of the KBP was in doubt, especially when the head of the KBP and the BMC was one and the same person, well-known columnist,

radio commentator, and staunch Marcos supporter Teodoro Valencia (Avecilla and Guieb 2017). Because registration with the BMC was compulsory, it also became compulsory for all broadcast stations as well as broadcasters to become members of the KBP. Nicdao, who is the current president of the KBP, acknowledges that while the self-regulatory mechanism of the KBP supposedly insulated broadcasters from government interference, "In reality, stations were careful not to offend the administration for fear of reprisal or closure."

Nicdao confirms the constraints news departments of stations had to deal with during martial law: News gathering was confined to police beats, which included crime, accidents, disasters and the like. News about Malacañang and other national government offices were fed to the stations by the Ministry of Public Information. There were no reports critical of the administration (Nicdao 2018). Because BMC-issued permits to operate broadcast stations were short, sometimes less than six months, stations were careful to stay on good terms with the government. As a capital-intensive industry, the risk of a discontinued or suspended permit was financially punitive.

On the other hand, the regime encouraged programming that was thought to be aligned with its cultural policy. Many credit the period for the flourishing of the arts, particularly music. The former First Lady, Imelda Marcos, sponsored artists and supported their works and commissioned projects dedicated to the arts. This cultural policy echoed in broadcasting through the concept called renaissance programming, which meant educational and cultural programming, like documentaries and artistic shows, such as classical music in the live weekly programs Paco Park Presents and Concert at the Park, as well as recorded foreign performances of classical music and musicians that were heard every afternoon on the government television station. We might add Armida Siguion-Reyna's Aawitan Kita to this list (Avecilla and Guieb 2017), and the mammoth parade of indigenous dance and music, Kasaysayan ng Lahi, which was televised live.

Also notable is the popularization on radio of what then began to be called Original Pilipino Music (OPM), acquiring for local music talents the stature and recognition that was denied them previously. With the new genre of Manila Sound, which appropriated the combined idioms of kundiman and rock and roll, folk music and jazz, and disco and soul, new bands and solo artists cut records that radio stations considered playable on the air. Nicdao clarifies that the resulting popularity of OPM was helped by the order of the Marcos administration to the radio stations to air more OPM.

It was in this context that Ugnayan, conceived by Maceda, was produced for radio. It was a radical concept of musical performance, which, in the words of a former colleague in radio, Romy Sager, "was a signal or move by the regime for the cultural inclusion and acceptance of the indigenous peoples" (Sager 2024). Sager was an announcer on the government station DZRP, which was one of the 20 stations that carried Ugnayan. He adds that the country was then at the intersection of cultural and political upheaval. This was a time when we were bombarded by the rhetoric of martial law in such axioms as Bagong Lipunan or New Society and Sa Ikauunlad ng Bayan, Disiplina ang Kailangan. Imelda Marcos, advised by former Cultural Center of the

Philippines (CCP) president Lucrecia Kasilag, viewed Ugnayan as an opportunity to use such a performance as a metaphor for the integration of a disparate, perhaps disunited nation. It was an attempt to concretize the political rhetoric of One People, One Nation, to support Marcos's New Society (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1974).

It seems to me that composer Maceda did not purposely use this rhetoric to describe Ugnayan. In fact, he first called the production Atmospheres to denote a musical atmosphere created by the multiplication of sound cells or parts into hundreds or thousands. It was an imaginative experiment that found support from the CCP, Imelda Marcos, local governments, and the controlled media, which then used this rhetoric to promote the experiment as a "quest for national identity and cultural integration" (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1974).

Ugnayan was a product of musical genius and daring creativity and originality that just happened to find fruition at a time we generally regard as a dark period in our history as a nation. The opus, however, should be celebrated, as we are doing today, for what I understand Maceda hoped Ugnayan accomplished, to quote, "Ugnayan opened the people's hearts and minds to a new music. With a continuing broadcast of Ugnayan, the people would be prepared for other shifts in cultural perspectives. Music can play an important role in giving a direction to this change." There is not even an allusion to martial law rhetoric in Maceda's description of his composition and what it hoped to accomplish. And that is how, I believe, we are taking it.

Let me end by mentioning some of the ironies in broadcasting that were produced by the martial law regime. First, the 1973 Constitutional provision that all media, including broadcast stations, must be owned fully by Filipinos. Second, the rise in cultural significance of Filipino music through the OPM. Another, the unexpected impact of the strict monitoring of media by government, particularly in the first few years of martial law, on the level of professionalization attained by soap opera scriptwriters. There are a few more. They do not justify or mitigate the deplorable control of the media, and indeed we acknowledge that some of these ironies were meant to quell criticisms and mask the way the regime suppressed the freedom of the press. But I believe we should acknowledge these ironies, one of them Ugnayan.

Thank you very much.

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