Searing quietness, distant highlands: Edgar Alandia Cañipa's poetics of sound

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Introduction

> […] what interests me is sound, music as a discovery... therefore, what I do is to work trying to imagine and discover unknown things that sound... and I hope that some person in the audience, if I am lucky, shares the same interest; that way, I will have company on this exploration, this journey […][1]

> Music does not communicate emotions, but rather it provokes emotions. Bolivian composer Edgar Alandia (Oruro, 1950) confesses that these ideas about music, which he supports, are closer to neurology than to music criticism. Therefore, he is interested in the physics of sound and its effects on the listener. He is also interested in understanding musical language as a game, a series of rules and conventions shared by composer and listener.[2]

This discovery, and the continuous reconstruction of the mental paths that led to it, belong to the core of Alandia's musical thinking. His view of composition brings back a very old element: the pleasure of playing and having fun with music. In the inexorable flow of time, between

[1] Interview with Edgar Alandia by Maria Carolina Caiafa. Harmonia: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4TVD-7CUlb0. Last access: April 6th, 2015.

[2] Vargas, Rubén. "Escuchar con los nervios". In La Razón, November 2nd, 2014, La Paz, Bolivia.

the dangerous thresholds of remembrance and oblivion, the organization of sounds must allow the listener to intuitively grasp this playful facet, realizing the rules of the game in the very moment of an active listening. Music, in fact, may unfold, ramify, organize and reveal itself to the listener who analyzes the information to which he or she listens.

Sound signals

For decades, Edgar Alandia has been proposing the development of several pedagogical concepts. In this context, we will use only three of them: "sound signal", "transformations" and "proportions". Some musical events are immediately recognizable and easy to memorize, thanks to their simple and unique nature. For the listener, they are "perceptible unities"; for the musician, primary sound configurations; for the music lover, fragments present in the music of many cultures, traditions and styles.

Paradoxically, these signals may exist out of stylistic contexts, when they cease being musical archetypes or rhetorical figures. They are free from such associations or, to be more exact, they are set free at the composer's command, in an auto-referential music organism. Twentieth-century music history, from post-serialism on, has shown that one may create a material and really transform it, by means of compositional processes which are free from restrictions imposed by automatisms and fetishist material visions.

Let us play now with a graphic analogy, and let us imagine a synesthetic relationship between geometry and music, involving two phenomena, the first one graphic (the line, a "continuous and indefinite succession of points" in a sole dimension)[3] and the second one acoustic (the gradual transformation between rhythm, pitch and timbre).[4]

"The capacity of informing"[5] is to playfully present a musical substance, revealing it to the listener with signals, marks, turns, stops, bifurcations, etc. These primary auditory configurations unfold, transform, juxtapose, regroup,

[3] Translated from the Diccionario de la Real Academia Española: http://dle.rae.es/?id=NMmmxZf. Last access: October 19th, 2017.

[4] Rhythm / Pitch Duality: hear rhythm become pitch before your ears: http://dantepfer.com/blog/?p=277. Last access: June 14th, 2015.

[5] Phrase used by Alandia in his composition classes.

superpose and form other more complex ones, thanks to codes that make the music flow cohesive. Alandia affirms that in each work such codes should unfold gradually, insinuating the rules of the game.

Points, lines and constellations

Glissandi, tremolos, trills and repeated notes, for instance, are archetypal acoustic events, sound signals and marks generated by the transformation of a primary perceptive configuration: the prolonged sound (the line, in graphical terms). A note, a sound complex, a chord, a harmonic sound, a pizzicato note, an idiophone stroke and actually any sound may be manifestations of the same structural category if they are clearly sustained or articulated in a sufficient time lapse. Complementarily (a word frequently used by Alandia), if one restricts drastically their duration, these signals will be catalogued in a different primary perceptive configuration: the point.

The transformation speed from a sound state to a different one, modulated (in acoustic terms) by an intervallic proliferation, takes us to two other acoustic signals very dear to Alandia: the glissando (or an accumulation of glissandi) and a quick agglomeration of notes or natural harmonics in string instruments. This is, in fact, a constellation of harmonic partials. Let us explore these signals deeper, from a perspective of the sound's nature. Here lays the notion of color, which is the sum of harmonics, the constellation of micro-events that are transformed qualitatively and quantitatively. From the perspective of French spectralism, this sound phenomenon is a structural model that replaces the principles of motivic and thematic approach (harmony, melody, rhythm and their formal archetypes) and the automatisms of serial theory.

The control of the proportions

> […] I have found in myself a way of seeing and thinking symmetrically.[6]
>
> These relationships [between sounds] – he says – are, perhaps, the only thing that music really "communicates".[7]

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4TVD7CUlb0. Last access: April 6th, 2015.

[7] Vargas, Rubén. "Escuchar con los nervios". In La Razón, November 2nd, 2014, La Paz, Bolivia.

The proliferation, distribution, dispersion, cohesion, juxtaposition, progression and superposition of signals is related, in Alandia's music, to the creation of a tool for simultaneously controlling the proportions of successive transformation and distribution.

Let us simplify this tool in order to understand it under the perspective of binary-proportion relationships. For instance, a great variety of durations may be easily conceived to be statistically heard and memorized into two complementary categories: short and long. More complex configurations may be equally conceived upon the polarization of two sound states: periodical and non-periodical, complex and simple, static and dynamic.

One of the most recent works by Alandia was written for eight double basses in 2014, and premiered by Ludus Gravis, group created by double-bass virtuosi Stefano Scodanibbio and Daniele Roccato in 2010. The score, with an ironic title, *Concerto grosso*, will serve as an example for Alandia's "thinking in terms of sound".

Two simultaneous processes are evident in the perceptive unity of figure 1, if we focus on the control of sound by abstract interval relationships. In the rhythmic-figural dimension, there is a tendency to the differentiation of two perceptive categories: the turn (or an appoggiatura, which expresses the interval's lineal dimension) and a sound point (the staccato as a vertical aspect of the interval).

Fig. 1. Measure 6 from *Concerto Grosso*, by Edgar Alandia

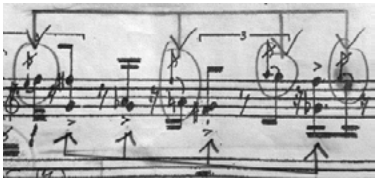


Fig. 2. Measure 28 from *Concerto Grosso*, by Edgar Alandia

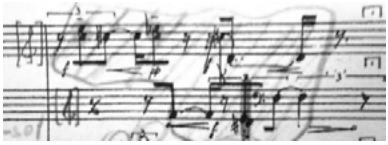


Fig. 3. Measure 41 from *Concerto Grosso*, by Edgar Alandia

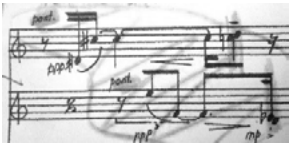
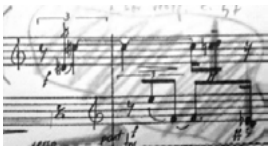


Fig. 4. Measure 57 from *Concerto Grosso*, by Edgar Alandia



Furthermore, it is clearly proposed, in the abstract field of intervals, an unfolding of two complementary binary relationships with a symmetry generated by the following intervals: major seventh – minor second and major second – minor seventh, in the points, and major seventh and minor sixth with their respective inversions (minor second and major third) in the appoggiatura turns.

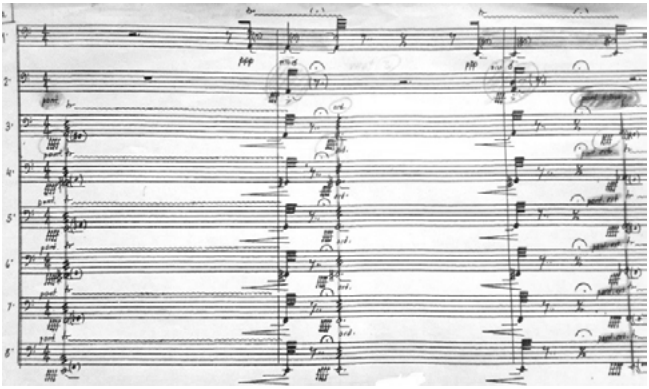
Three intervals of similar dimension do not play an important role in the unification of the pitch realm (perfect fourth, tritone and perfect fifth). Statistically, eight proportionally similar intervals prevail in the whole piece: major seventh, minor seventh, major sixth and minor sixth, with their complements: major third, minor third, major second and minor second. The perceptive units of figures 2, 3 and 4 are a representative sample of the progression of intervals and their materialization into sound signals. In these four examples, the two sound signals are fixed in a sole register and assigned to durational proportions that allow the interval relations to sound. Nevertheless, the interval may remain in an abstract sphere, if it is absorbed by a process whose goal is the sound. As further exploration, we shall have in mind the acoustic phenomenon of the gradual transformation between rhythm, pitch and timbre in order to analyze the beginning of *Concerto grosso* and the signal classified as line.

Figure 5 presents some of the possible timbric transformations of the line. Alandia creates sound complexes that transcend the intervallic relationships with an accumulation of articulations in each event. In the first measure, six double basses articulate a low-register cluster with trills close to the bridge,

played with great bow pressure. In other words: trill – ponticello – *fff*, generating a noise band of such density that in subsequent transformations it will be easily recognized. We are effectively facing a new perceptive unity, converted to a more complex signal, with a superior structural hierarchy.

The first double bass presents another possibility of timbric exploration of the line, very characteristic of Alandia's style, which is the alternation between a fundamental note and some of its close harmonics. A similar operation is playing a prolonged sound sul ponticello while generating a sound of a non-harmonic spectrum using the extreme ponticello.

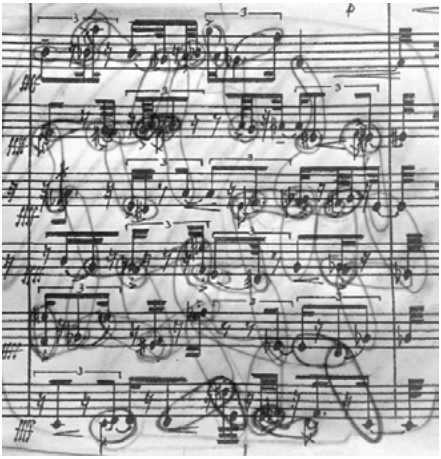
Fig. 5. Measure 1 from *Concerto Grosso*, by Edgar Alandia



Grouping and reconfiguration

The first analyzed perceptive unity (figure 1) suffers, in measure 14 (figure 6), a metamorphosis, becoming a mobile-cluster, which is articulated as a micro-polyphony of six double basses. It is, in fact, a superposition of the same linear-mounting logic of the two processes present in the aforementioned perceptive unity. The linear material is transformed polyphonically into a new acoustic signal, perceived as the irruption of a complex signal.

Fig. 6. Measure 6 from Concerto Grosso, by Edgar Alandia
(to be read in bass clef)



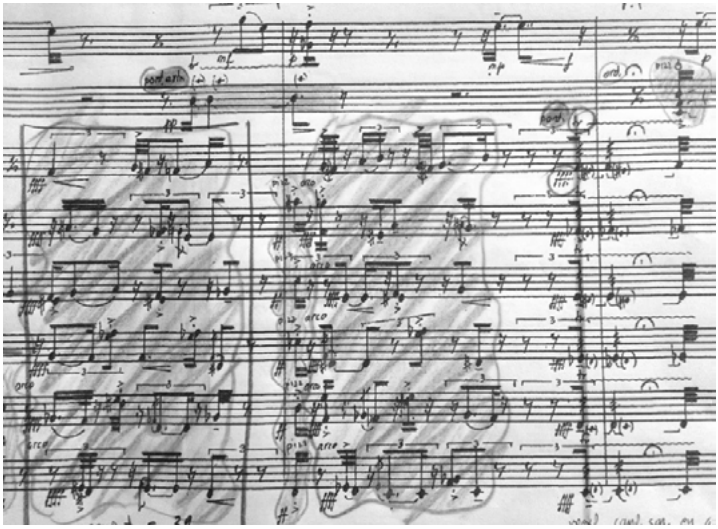
This moment is the onset of a search for cohesion in two fronts: the internal transformation of the subsequent presentations of the signal and the limitation of the temporal expansion of this event, in order to condense it into an easy-to-rember acoustic signal. At this point of the analysis, we must present a conclusion about one of the aspects of this "thinking through sound": when the audition focuses on following a perceptive unit, perhaps intuitively selected, there is a dynamic state of tension between memory and the ephemeral quality of these units.

In this sense, figure 7 reveals a strategy that clarifies the information retained in the memory. At first, the sound signal that we named mobile-cluster suffers a couple of small contractions. We are in the middle of a process of additive juxtaposition, which pairs these two contracted instances of the mobile-cluster with two other signals. The point is expressed as a pizzicato chord of symmetrical structure, and the line, as a sound complex of high timbric density, achieved by the accumulation of articulations, a signal derived from the beginning of the work.

This linear process, furthermore, is superposed upon an operation that disperses, for a moment, the linear event of measure 6 (figure 1), making the internal relationships of this texture yet more dynamic. This new sound

configuration (figures 6 and 7) is functionally converted into a formal mark, given it is extended for the first time, for about five measures, announcing the end of the work. The closing of the piece is done through a process in which a complex polyphonic texture converges upon a linear process in which all the sound signals of the work are juxtaposed.

Fig. 7. Measures 18 -19 from Concerto Grosso, by Edgar Alandia



Some conclusions

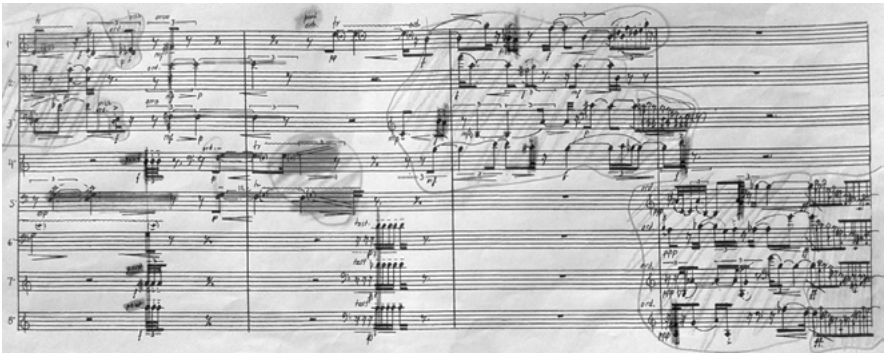
Let us examine first some of the instrumentation possibilities in Concerto grosso. The double bass is an instrument that offers a rich spectrum, and the group of eight double basses is a flexible meta-instrument, capable of a great register expansion, with a thorough and detailed control of the sound spectrum. For instance, specific simple bow articulations, played in adequate dynamics, produce the phenomenon known as "differential sounds", or "Tartini sounds". This effect consists of sounds and beatings similar to multiphonics. The sonority of the work is deliberately close to the sound of many wind instruments of the Bolivian Andean region.[8]

[8] The Belgian physicist and musician Arnaud Gérard said: "A whole spectrum of pinkillos in the Andean rural areas of Bolivia, especially during Carnival, is traditionally played with this […] beating multiphonic sound". See bibliography.

The score and the recording of the work clearly prove the efficient use of notation, without the complications found in many of the scores of Helmut Lachenmann, for example. Notation favors acoustic effects, thanks to a continuous regrouping of the eight instruments, ranging from solo to various chamber subgroups, with articulations carefully selected in order to control the sound spectrum.

An image is the best way of ending these conclusions. Figure 8 shows a panorama of the primary acoustic signals (lines, points and constellations) and their reconfigurations, which create complex events, avoid their disaggregation and limit their temporal expansion. There, we can see processes of distribution, superposition and juxtaposition of the sound matter, in a clear horizontal, vertical and transversal progression of the eight dominant intervals of the work.

Fig. 7. Measures 77 - 80 from Concerto Grosso, by Edgar Alandia



Analyzing the creative tools presented in this chapter, we may establish a net of relationships that consolidate the transformation, progression and creation of a signal hierarchy. Two issues, always latent in every musical process, become evident: saturation and entropy, which may result in a confuse perception of the work.

One can always risk exploring the limits of the intelligibility of musical creation codes, in a continuous search of sounds that are as much exceptional as ephemeral.

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