Edgar Alandia, Bolivian composer

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Edgar Alandia C. was born in Oruro, in the Bolivian Altiplano, in 1950, and lives in Italy since 1970. Because he belongs to two distinct worlds, he is able to have a unique perspective on things. As a child, in his hometown, he received his first piano lessons, completing his music education at the National Music Conservatory in La Paz.

At age 19, he moved to Rome, unable to speak a sole word in Italian, to study composition at the Santa Cecilia National Academy with Franco Donatoni, an important name within the Italian musical avant-garde. The clash with the dominant culture was hard, as it should have been. Donatoni tried to force Alandia to write music his way, and the confrontation was inevitable – this is but an instance of the tensions experienced by Alandia at that time.

The young Alandia came from a country rich in ancestral cultures – which had known its apogee in a moment of complete isolation, centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards to the continent. Surrendering to a new culture, however seductive, would be inconceivable.

Andean people have a centuries-old cultural heritage, which enables them to see the world from an original perspective. For them, the European culture is just another culture – nowadays dominant, especially for political and economic reasons, but not necessarily more important – a fine culture with notable values which may be assimilated and fused with the ancestral values of their own

culture, according to taste and necessity. Donatoni lacked the greatness to comprehend the world where Alandia came from.

Paradoxically, of these two worlds, we know Italy well. But what do we understand about Bolivia? What do we know about Bolivian music besides stereotypical indigenous folk music executed by urban musicians (not indigenous), in squares and subway stations, for tourists around the world? These questions may sound strange for Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, but for us, Brazilians (and also English- and other Spanish-speaking readers) these may be pertinent questions.

Bolivia is located in the central-western part of South America and, like Paraguay, is landlocked. It has borders with Brazil, in the north and east, Paraguay and Argentina, in the south, and Chile and Peru, in the west. Its independence was declared in 1809 (13 years before Brazil's independence), but the republic was instituted in 1825 (64 years before ours). We are a slightly younger country. However, when we compare our young culture to the ancestral Bolivian culture, we realize we are but infants. The Bolivian Altiplano, western portion of Bolivia's territory, used to be part of the Inca Empire, the largest empire of pre-Columbian era.

The Andes are one of the most culturally rich regions of the Americas. Cradle of a number of highly developed civilizations, notably the Inca, the Andes range was the natural barrier that divided Spanish and Portuguese Americas. In a certain way, it prevented the cultural and scientific developments of its ancient people from penetrating Brazilian territory. We live the nostalgia of a civilization that, unfortunately, did not belong to us.

Before the arrival of the Incas, the region known today as Oruro was the home of a millenarian people named Uru. The Urus settled by the Poopó lake, where nowadays the city of Oruro is located. From that point, they spread as far north as Lake Titicaca and southern Peru. Eventually, they mixed with the two biggest Andean ethnicities, the Quechuas and the Aymaras, until the Incan and Spanish invasions practically decimated their culture. Nowadays, there are little more than a few hundred Uru descendants in Bolivia and Peru, who, since centuries ago, adopted the Quechua and Aymara languages, in addition to Spanish.

The current conception of Andean music around the world, dictated by mass culture, has less to do with its intrinsic musical characteristics than with is political appeal. Such conception was (and, in a certain sense, still is) governed not so much by the pleasure of listening to that music per se, but rather by abstract social and political characteristics supposedly reflected in the Andean musical atmosphere, such as social resistance, class struggle, ascension of the left wing in the Latin-American political scenario, etc. These characteristics, strongly present in the 1960s, have nothing to do with the tradition which apparently originated the Andean songs but rather with the time when the songs became famous in Europe and, subsequently, in the USA. In other words, listeners were guided by the disc industry less by musical traits than by the social fantasy this music used to carry with it. The most emblematic example is the originally instrumental song *El Cóndor Pasa*. Composed by Peruvian composer Daniel Alomía Robles, in 1913, as a number for the *zarzuela El Cóndor Pasa*, the song made its way into Parisian albums and stages thanks to the Andean band *Los Incas*, comprised of Argentinian and Venezuelan musicians. In 1965, at the *Théâtre de l'Est Parisien*, North-American musician Paul Simon heard the song for the first time and asked permission for recording it. Thinking it was a folk song, Simon added English lyrics and recorded his voice over the instrumental version by *Los Incas*. This version of *El Cóndor Pasa* (titled *If I could*), released in 1970, was an international hit and immortalized the musical traits that started to be considered inherent to Andean traditional music: popular songs with formal structure similar to European and North-American popular songs, executed in the so-called "Andean atmosphere" (Andean instruments played by Latin-American groups dressed up in Andean attire). The international success of *El Cóndor Pasa* was so huge that the song was elevated to national cultural heritage by the Peruvian government, and considered a second national anthem.

Nevertheless, in the Bolivian and Peruvian Altiplanos, traditional music making is, generally speaking, an activity of the whole community. In other words, all the members of a community play an active role in the music (ranging from the combination of organized sounds to dance and multiple social interactions), as opposed to the current western model of music making, in which a small group performs the music for a bigger-numbered audience, which receives this music passively (although it may interact with the sounds through dance moves, the audience is not part of the sound production). At these places, where music is traditionally realized in a collective fashion, music structure often consists of long sections, exhaustively repeated and not contrasting with each other, which

facilitates the insertion and participation of the community's non-professional members. The volume of sound is usually high, textures tend to homophony, with little harmonic and melodic clarity, and the tuning system varies from region to region. There is also a strong preference for high and strident sounds. The great variety of wind instruments of the flute family, such as *quena*, *tarka*, *siku* e *pinkillos* (there are more than one hundred different types of flutes in the Andes), dominate the soundscape, although other instruments are also present, like the *charango*, the *bombo* and, less often, European instruments (accordion and violin).

Would it have been hard for a Bolivian boy in the 1950s, immersed in an ancestral culture, to find out his vocation in European concert music? The values we assign to certain musical styles, as well as what we consider a "particular taste" for the sonority of certain instruments and for certain types of music – and here I refer to a universal gamut of styles – are far from being universal. These judgments belong, after all, to the realm of culture, sentimental references and individual psychological traits. When Franco Donatoni tells Edgar Alandia that he should proceed like the Italian avant-garde composers, or else go back to his home country to compose folk music, he is, despite the social tension involved, considering only one side of the situation: that, because the Andean culture has strong ethnic characteristics, every Andean native should make Andean folk music, like his ancestors.

If the word tradition refers to the transmission of a body of values, knowledge, and social and cultural customs of a determined social group, this never means these habits should be immutable. An ancient music practice does not need to produce only fossils in order to establish itself as a tradition. Despite all efforts to revive a tradition and to keep it alive, as well as to make it seem and sound natural to others, traces of historical artificiality will always be present, when this tradition is closely observed. The attempts to confer authenticity to a distant past, and to recapture its essential origin are, at the same time, fragile and contradictory, because the past only emerges as a reflection of the present. Tradition is, in fact, a live organism in constant change, always incorporating new elements. Its capacity of renewal is extraordinary, as it is also extraordinary the capacity of renewal of modern practices when the incorporation of traditional values is allowed.

The Andean tradition is closely connected to the experiences and memory of Edgar Alandia, and constitutes a living part of his current world. Although

this world is comprised of elements inherited from the past, Alandia is one of the few composers who know how to rebuild them and how to incorporate them to his music. His musical thinking is symmetrical, the same way ancient Bolivian pictographic patterns are symmetrical. His music tends to reproduce the melodic structure of Andean music, based on the pentatonic scale, which, by its turn, is constituted of two symmetrical three-note sequences, usually treated by addition or subtraction. His sound universes are mysterious, and his treatment of musical time is unique and sophisticated. His spatial memory is impressive. Maybe conditioned by the immense spaces where he was born and grew up, in his music practically there is no silence. There is always sound. Would it be, as he says, for fear of the emptiness?