

Writing music

Edgar Alandia

Writing music has always had a very special meaning in my life, but despite being a priority, it has always been something I consider highly related to life's progress and its context.

There is a profound difference between a Bolivian provincial town in the 1950s and 1960s (where the fundamental elements of my education, sensibility, personality and curiosities were certainly established) and Italy in the 1970s, a society which witnessed a centuries-old artistic and intellectual production and which achieved full industrial development (and where I have learned my techniques and my profession, where I have defined my interests and matured my political view of the world, society and life). Therefore, the picture is broad, complex and almost dangerously confusing. In any case, having had the opportunity of seeing things from such different points of view has probably been an advantage which has worked like a filter in the process of defining myself as an individual, as a musician or as a person.

It would be nice and anecdotal to tell the story of a nineteen-year-old young man who lands in Rome in order to study at Santa Cecilia Conservatory, clueless and with no idea of what awaits him in terms of work, time and finances, and who, on top of that, does not speak a word of Italian.

It seems to me that even this aspect has contributed to the synthesis which is reflected in the music I write: the surprise, the curiosity, the interest for things somewhat distant which attract and repel you, as much as yours, another

unknown component you wish you are a part of but you do not know either. Finally, little by little, at times by one and at times by the other, this synthesis comes about. It was never searched for or consciously elaborated, but it materializes in your musical work and defines your cultural, geographical, generational, political and artistic identity.

Family influences, as well as existential influences, have certainly been very important to the formation of an idea of culture, of a taste, of knowledge that has taken me to the learning of the piano and the passion for music. Furthermore, having grown up in a working-class town, in times of contrasts and social injustice which culminated with Che Guevara's guerrilla in a country with ancestral culture as strong as discriminatory racism, has also stamped a profound mark on me. This racism targeted precisely the heirs of such cultures. On the other hand, the contact, the fascinating discoveries, and the shock with the most significant of the enticing dominant culture are the ingredients cooked in the music I write. I try to balance these two influences in my compositions, for they are the two sides of the coin I have to present.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to comment on a single element, constant throughout my musical formation, since the beginning. As a child, when I was eleven years old, I was ousted from Escuela Nacional de Música "María Luiza Luzio" in Oruro, Bolivia, for the bold act of "composing". Later, in an audition, the director of the Conservatorio Nacional de Música in La Paz, Humberto Vizcarra Monje, advised me to follow the career of architecture. Finally, during the courses at Academia Nacional de Santa Cecilia, Franco Donatoni's opinion was: "if you want to stay and work here, you should do what we do; otherwise, you had better go back to your country and do folklore". These small incentives and my typical laziness, of which I was victim and fervent practitioner, did their part in the natural decision of following the path of composition and becoming a musician. I shall recognize especially my first piano instructors: Ms. Electra Guerrero de López Videla and Ms. Jirina Kuklisonova de Lieberman, and the composer Alberto Villalpando.

After the period of formation and information in Italy, a series of other experiences were crucial to me when I was considering, in the midst of a whirlpool of ideas, where to start from: the contact with people of great reputation in the artistic scene like my uncles, the painters Miguel Alandia Pantoja and Oscar Alandia Pantoja (Oscar Pantoja), the writers Jaime Sáenz and Sergio Suárez Figueroa, with politicians of the level of Guillermo Lora or Filemón Escobar,

during my early years in Bolivia; the work with the great choreographer Maurice Béjart in Belgium and the contact with composers like Goffredo Petrassi and Franco Donatoni, in addition to the initial enthusiasm of Alberto Villalpando.

With the difficulties of the training years, and of understanding how familiar and how strange was the European “culture” to me, my primary instinct was to try to identify myself with what I actually was: an Andean Bolivian. I have never had any attraction to an artistic object if not as a reflection of something deeper, more enticing: the thought process which generated it. Therefore, I have never tried to reproduce melodies or little tunes that would sound like Andean popular music, and even less, pseudo-ancestral aesthetic ideas and cultural claims; on the other hand, I was attracted by the Andean sound, the timbre of the wind of the mountains and of the Altiplano, the timbre of the wind instruments not perfectly tuned, with that warm and introverted color which I adored since my childhood years. These are the subjects, I believe, of the first phase of my compositions, those situated between 1976 and 1983. These pieces were based on serial and post-serial techniques and their intention, along with the timbral play, was making myself conscious of a way of thinking music, a way of organizing the sound.

Another important factor for me was trying to incorporate a political perspective in my work; those were times of military dictatorship and my education, my family’s militant experience, the criminal acts that were taking place throughout Latin America, in addition to having experienced the selfish opulence of the “developed” countries, gave me the firm idea that I had to be, forever, a communist.

Two works were particularly important for the development of my musical curiosities: *Rumi*, for cello and piano, and *¡Grito!*, for soprano. The first, for showing me a possible harmonic world, and the second, for the possibility of organizing a rigorous structure that gives the impression of a quasi improvisation. The orchestral work *Sajsayhuamàn* was also relevant. In this piece, “loose” sounds create “loose” blocks in a very rigorous structure that flows in a very natural, “loose” way.

In a period of great enthusiasm, self-confidence and intellectual delirium, *Paititi* (which means *such as*¹), from the years 1984-1987, for string quartet and

¹ Translator’s note: one of the hypothesis for the etymology of *Paititi*, the name of a legendary Incan gold city, is that it is derived from a Quechua word meaning *such as*.

orchestra, represents my experience of structural speculation at a maximum level of complexity. It consists of a basic material which is developed by one of the instruments of the quartet. “Such as” the original, this material is developed by the three remaining instruments of the ensemble. This material becomes the new basic material for the instrument quartet and is developed by the orchestra in thirteen to sixteen quartets which elaborate “such as” the original quartet; these quartets are different in timbre, registration, family, etc. The orchestral texture suggests the new basic material to one of the instruments of the quartet, which generates the new cycle, “such as”... etc. *Paititi* remains unfinished; there is not much to be done, but, having left the piece abandoned for such a long time, it has been hard to come to terms with myself.

The next phase (1987-1995) represents the practice of firm structures around screws which generate natural harmonic fields, as a result of dissonant or consonant combinations. In each work, these combinations are contextualized by the original material of the very work. The realization that every material contains in itself the possibility of being organized using its own grammar and even its own syntax comes from this period.

My timbrical universe enriched with new instrumental techniques, and the “tics” of which I am a victim slowly started to crystallize. Among these tics is a way of seeing, feeling and perceiving time, space and the world, in a symmetric way that ultimately is my way of working, of organizing materials, of organizing the composition itself: my way of thinking, my way of being.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify how each work follows a “principle”, derived of each material’s intrinsic characteristics. Obviously, this is a sonorous principle, or a principle that sounds. I believe music does not need verbal or written explanation. It explains itself, at the very moment it sounds. It is important to say that the “principle” is never a goal; it is actually only a reference, a very important and indispensable one, but only a reference around which one can move with maximum freedom and at the same time with maximum clarity.

Another relevant aspect is understanding how a musical work is but the materialization, the crystallization of a thought process that develops musically, starting from the basic characteristics of a material and following some kind of principle. In other words: a musical work is the composer’s thoughts sounding;

that and no more. In my opinion, the works that better represent this period are: ...*se me ha perdido ayer, el canto de las estrellas*, for five instruments, and ...*y sigue la escondida senda*, for viola and chamber orchestra. In this period I could also verify my incapacity to write melodramas. Opera, as it is currently understood, does not conform an ideal dimension in which, in my understanding, an important text (for its poetry and meaning) can be expressed. Therefore, going back to the previous subject, if one applies a musical compositional principle similar to that principle which supposedly generated the text, a profoundly unified and homogeneous “object” could be obtained.

In *Perla, fábula triste*, the principle of the “mind state” or “mood state” expresses itself in every creative parameter of the work, with a “trick” for emphasizing the text. The “recitative” takes place in the instrumental part (instrumental recitative) and the arias are given to the reciter, i.e., the music is expressed by the words (phonemes) of the text.

The peculiarity and the experiment, in my opinion successful, consist in the fact that the writer, the choreographer and the composer work autonomously on a novel and “compose” their own part alone and without any interference of the other languages. The final assembling takes place only at the final phase, determining simply the chronology and the duration of each scene. The experiment happened successively in ...*sottili canti, invisibili* and in *Oruro, 3706 s.n.m.*, with the same excellent results from the perspective of formal unity.

During this period, I realized that there is a common denominator between my symmetrical nature and the original Andean culture. Perhaps they are only coincidences, but the fact is that coincidences are useful in order to investigate materials, or, to be more precise, the essential material of Andean music. The goal is not to reproduce this music, but to develop it in a current and conscious way. It is evident in this research the coincidence between the symmetrical “principles” of the Andean archeology, Andean fabrics, some Andean musical instruments and the autochthonous Andean music.

...*como se suena de la rosa y del viento*, for orchestra (1998-2009), is a work in which I confine myself for a long period. I was not successful in integrating the structure, the rigor, the material characterization and the fluidity of the

sound in something homogeneous and interesting and which, at the same time, would explain itself by sounding intelligibly however complex its structure.

Trying to understand where to go, I realize I do not have, nor ever had, much to say, much to express in the music I do. All I have is the simple curiosity about “discovering” the sound and its inner characteristics. It is simply an excursion within the sound and its possibilities, an experience to be shared with an audience. If I am lucky enough, some listener will join this fantasy trip and enjoy the experience.

The works which best show the balance described in the previous paragraph are dedicated to the double bass: *Como silenciosas gotas de lluvia... caen*, for double bass and piano, and *Concerto grosso*, for eight double basses, in addition to *...como una luz de invierno a mi lado*, for five instruments.

The material used in the works of this period is very essential, based upon an interpretation of the so-called “pentatonic scale” of Andean music. This set, according to my personal interpretation, does not actually conform to the concept of scale, but is rather the symmetric succession of two trichords formed by a minor third and a tone, i.e., a bigger and a smaller interval. This proportion characterizes, as well, the complementary sounds which are between these sounds (a tone – bigger interval – and a semitone – smaller interval). The whole development of this material follows symmetrical principles, not because I define something “a priori”, but because I follow my most natural way of thinking.

It is fundamental to reflect on the importance of the gesture, the timbre, the proportions between the durations of sounds and the indefinite definition of the events, always bearing in mind that everything we hear relates to what we have just heard before. There is an absolute need of balance (although very subjective) between the clarity of information (sound signals) and the memory as a resource.

I realize, finally, that in my music there is no silence; my silence always sounds. I read often that Andean civilizations, conditioned by the immense void spaces where they built their cultures, where their people have been born, grown up and lived, are obsessed by the *horror vacui*, the fear of empty spaces... is that the case?