

Reflecting on style

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In *Reflecting on style*, I try to stimulate thoughts, ideas and discussions about style, its function, its necessity, its limits and its perspectives, taking as a reference my experience as a composer. In 1980, I had the opportunity to have a “portrait concert”. In that circumstance, I presented six compositions, thinking that each one of them was a different piece, since the topic of each one was different. However, at the dress rehearsal, to which I went in order to check if everything was fine, I realized that all the pieces sounded almost the same. Try to imagine how disappointed and ashamed I felt! The interesting thing was that, at the end of the concert, many musicians, composers and critics were sincerely surprised because, in their opinion, as such a young composer, I had found my own style. That experience was very important for me because it made me think about style, made me wonder what its meaning could be. Where does it come from? How important is it, if at all, in creative activities?

When teaching composition, I have had to give some answers to these questions, since originality seems to be a great problem for young musicians and, as a consequence, style comes out as an important need. In my opinion, style is but a photograph that shows clearly more than our possibilities, our limits.

If we share the idea that any composition is the concrete expression of a thought – that it is an object that reflects relations and ideas that we combine through

sound, using sound; or that it is sounds we combine using the possibilities of our thoughts – we can say that in creating music we have two diverse elements that make up composition: sounds and thoughts, materials and strategies. These converge in a result which is the piece of music. This piece of music is an object that sounds the ideas that are within it. These two elements can determine the characteristics of a piece of music or, also, the particularities of a composer's work: the material (scales, sequences, gestures, timbres etc.) and the strategies or thoughts that he or she uses may be the main guideline towards a definition of style.

If the main interest of a composer is an object, a sonorous object (the material), he or she may try to develop that object, applying certain strategies which result in the materialization of that object into another object – which is the piece of music. If this object is successfully obtained, perhaps the composer will use that material in different pieces and in different ways, repeating it, and therefore “creating”, both by the similarity of the results and by the repetition of the object characteristics, a particular style, such as that of the Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino.

The other way of defining a style is investigating the attention of the composer to certain strategies or processes, because even if he or she uses different materials it is possible that, since the path and the processes are the same, the results will sound very similar to each other. This gives the audience the idea of a common ‘characteristic’ within the music (e.g. Bach, Schumann, Chopin). Of course, both elements can be simultaneously employed by the composer and, of course, it would be helpful if both are intentionally used in order to characterize his or her music.

At this point, it seems clear that, searching for a determinate objective or determinate objects, the composer will use limited resources and ignore other possibilities of his creativity. Something different is aiming to explore limited elements; multiple faces of an object that finally show the different faces of a personality or its specific characteristics. Fantasy may not be defined by having too many ideas, but by having many points of view about one single idea. I like to think that the important thing is not to try to obtain advantages from certain approaches but, simply, to try to be authentic. Muriel Barbery, a young French writer, once wrote: “art is emotion without desire”. If we agree, style is obviously not important and it does not belong to this beautiful thought.

I do not think that, in music history, style has been a problem for composers. Perhaps, by focusing on style, we can better identify the characteristics of a historical period and, when we analyze a piece of music, taking as reference its time period, we can find similar materials and strategies that produce similar results.

It is difficult to define, for example, the music of Stravinsky – can we say what exactly Stravinsky’s style is? Do Schoenberg’s compositions follow a specific style? In some of Schoenberg’s pieces the similarity comes out because of the composition strategies and processes, the dodecaphonic technique.

As I remarked before, in music as thought, as science, as philosophy, as art, style probably depends on the composer’s interests, the composer’s possibilities, and the composer’s limits. Style should not be a goal but at most it is a consequence. Art is not easy, beauty is not easy either. Art is not necessarily complicated but, for sure, it is not easy.

In the last thirty years, many composers followed this idea of finding something “interesting” for easy and successful fruition and, once they found it, they repeated the path in an obvious way, exactly as the commercial market does with a successful product (e.g. Arvo Pärt). It is evident that music, as any other artistic expression, has diversified its targets. What I consider important and necessary is a clear definition of the space in which each stream of music moves.

Going back to my experience in composing music, as I said at the beginning, I have never had to think of being original and, of course, I have never tried to create a style. Similarities in my compositions surely come out of my interests and my limitations. Even if I have handled very different materials, the sound that comes out of my compositions is very similar – I owe this to my intellectual processes and my sonorous fantasy within my limited possibilities, not to trying to write in a particular style.

Since I come from a geographic area with a quite strong cultural background with specific characteristics in all forms and expressions, it is probable that this culture has influenced and conditioned my music. But it is important to me to remark that I did not look for expressing it or making any specific reference to it.

In a certain moment I realized, I do not know why, that I think symmetrically, and also that I instinctively have a strong auditory memory of particular sonorities. As a result, the combination of these two elements produces objects with particular characteristics.

Fig. 1. Portal of the Sun – Tiwanaku, Bolivia



Fig. 2. Engraving in Tiwanaku – La Paz, Bolivia

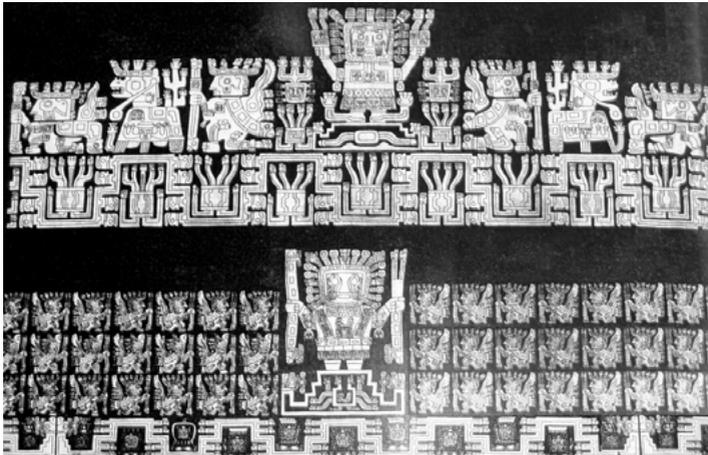


Fig. 3. Andean pentatonic scale divided into two three-note modules

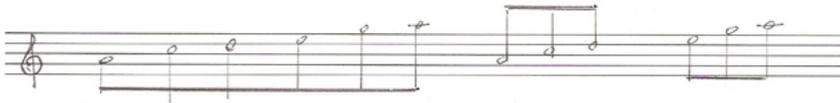
-21-

The image shows a page of a musical score, page 21, featuring a complex orchestration. The score is divided into two main sections. The first section, on the left, is a dense, rhythmic passage with many notes. The second section, on the right, is a more melodic and dynamic passage, starting with a *ppp* (pianissimo) dynamic and including a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. The instruments listed on the left include Flutes (Fl. 1, 2), Oboes (Ob. 1, 2), Clarinets (Cl. 1, 2), Flutes (Fl. 3, 4), Cor Anglais (Cor.), Trumpets (Tr. 1, 2, 3, 4), Trombones (Tbn. 1, 2, 3), Tuba (Tub.), Euphonium (Eup.), Trombones (Tbn. 4), Violins (Vni. I, II), Violas (Vla. I, II), Cellos (Vcl. I, II), and Double Basses (Cb.). The score includes various dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *pp*, *mp*, *f*, and *fff*. There are also performance instructions like *rit.* and *con più forza*. A handwritten 'V' is at the top center. At the bottom right, there is a handwritten note: "Se la situazione sale per PPD il disegno".

I can say that, for several years, the topic of my works was to sound out my possibilities. I did not have special references or targets to meet. Even if I were engaged with the political situation of my country, my musical research has always been the same: to try to detect and to make myself more conscious of my possibilities and limitations. It is quite clear that, even if unintentional, there are some similarities in my pieces.

At one point I was attracted by the structure of Andean music. In this music, two small symmetrical sequences of three sounds are treated mostly by addition and subtraction.

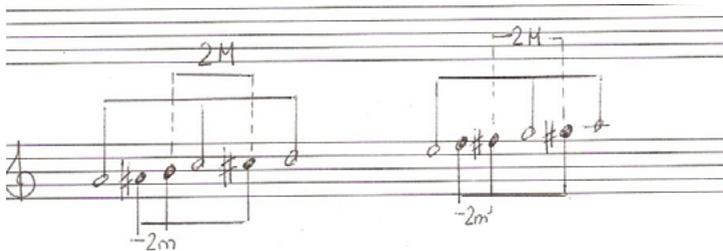
Fig. 4. Main trichords and derived trichords, featuring the proportions: big interval – small interval (material used in several of Edgar Alandia’s works)



Many of my most recent works have their origin in this material, because, as I said, symmetries attract me.

To these original three sounds I add three more sounds within the principal sequence, in order to complete it as a six-sound cluster.

Fig. 5. Fragment of ... *como se suena de la rosa y del viento* relates to Fig. 1



Another topic I am interested in is the nature of sound, its “natural” possibilities and limits. Therefore, I used to combine all of these interests within a sound research in which I use the aforementioned sound memory.

I am convinced that every material contains its grammar and syntax, but the difficulty is to observe it without any intentions or purposes. Its features come out through experimentation, and its structure suggests the ways its development should proceed. To all questions, answers come by themselves. We just have to watch and listen around with a special kind of attention and the answers will come to us.