

...on the matter of “cultural identity” in music composition

Edgar Alandia

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the globalization, which should have allowed everyone to access and share a variety of points of view, we have actually observed a tendency of many social, religious, political, cultural and even ethnic groups to close themselves off, bringing about disasters of apocalyptic proportions, such as the disintegration of Yugoslavia or the extremist Islamist movements in the Middle East.

Globalization, instead of giving way to the exchange of ideas, thoughts and cultures, has done nothing but facilitating exploitation by multinational companies and financial corporations. As a natural reaction, nationalist feelings aroused in response to the social incertitude and the advance of economic power. The “need” of defining a supposed “identity” is another spontaneous consequence of globalization. In some cases, it becomes an obsession and, in others, a tool for demagogic manipulation. Personally, I think that one is no more than one is, a synthesis of various experiences, including temporal, geographical, social and intellectual ones.

Moving on to the matter of “cultural identity” – and starting from the premise that art is closely related to culture – it may be worthwhile recalling Paul Klee, who defined art as something that does not reproduce what is seen, but makes it possible to see the invisible. It may also be interesting to contemplate some psychiatric “definitions” which enunciate that art does not communicate

any given message, emotion or feeling. Art, instead, gives rise to emotions and feelings.

Art only communicates the relationships between the material elements of various languages: colors and shapes in painting, words in literature, sounds in music. Art is a medium for the expression of thoughts. A thought may express emotions or feelings but, over all, it is clear that a thought is expressed by means of languages, i.e., by means of codes. It is a fact that knowledge of the code is a requirement for the intrinsic comprehension of a work of art. However, there is no impediment to making such work provoke sensations and even emotions in various and different levels. The work of art has the precise function of giving us the possibility of a unique experience, of “comprehending” something that is beyond the work itself, something that is inside us, something that we understand our own way, something that we find out about ourselves.

Music is a language that has its own codes and its own structural processes. Likewise, different eras, styles, regions and civilizations also have their own codes. Therefore, a code is the fundamental medium to express a thought. Being the sound and the thought the constitutive elements of music, it is interesting to imagine a definition of music, and to ask two questions: is music the articulation of thoughts through sounds? Or is it the articulation of sounds through thoughts? Without opting for a sole answer, being both possible, it is evident that music involves sound and thought in a subtle and necessary balance. I think this is precisely what music is about: a way of organizing thoughts through sounds, or even a way of organizing sounds through a way of thinking.

I believe, furthermore, that the idea of investigating these matters is not only interesting, but even necessary. Less interesting, in fact, would be to end this investigation, and even less to end it with the discovery of a supposed cultural identity that in fact already exists. It would be like the discovery of boiling water, which has always been H₂O, anyway. Any investigation on the technical resources of musical instruments – in our case, Andean ones – their expressive possibilities and their structural context do not grant, in any way, an identity that is not the composer’s.

Culture means to comprehend, not to understand. In order to comprehend, one must have experienced and internalized that experience. Hence, it would be relatively more useful to think about culture as a reference and not as a goal. Culture is an individual experience and the sum of individual experiences

gives place to a collective experience, a collective consciousness; in essence, to a shared culture. I do not believe that there are better cultures, or worse cultures; there are different cultures and I strongly believe that cultural richness is not found in the quantity of identical elements, but actually in the quality of innumerable diverse elements.