

# On Edgar Alandia

*Giancarlo Schiaffini*

A famous soprano was responsible for my first encounter with Edgar Alandia, at the end of the 1970s. Michiko Hirayama had told me about a young composer of Bolivian origin whom she had met on an international panel of judges. Michiko and I used to work together in Gruppo Instrumental Nuove Forme Sonore in Rome, ensemble which we had founded in the previous decade, along with composer-performers Jesús Villa-Rojo and Bruno Tommaso.

The idea of this group was to approach “contemporary music” not only from a compositional perspective, but also from the point of view of the performance, including a particular interest for improvisation. Bruno and I have always been very active in the field of jazz, and we have always considered crucial the participation of performers in the creative process, in order to reduce the distance between composition and its realization. On the other hand, this was not a particularly original idea, given the fact that personalities like Bruno Maderna had already experimented with this kind of solution. At that time, we thought, as we still do, that a compositional process in installments leads to a quasi schizophrenia between the creative moment and the moment of musical realization. At first, Alvin Curran and Roberto Laneri were also active participants of the group.

The group eventually evolved into an association, for bureaucratic reasons such as facilitating the obtainment of official support. Its personnel consisted of Francis-Marie Utti (cello), Marianne Eckstein (flute) and Michele Jannacone

(percussion), besides Michiko and myself. Around that time, the group achieved excellent results and gained the attention of various composers, who started to write for Nuove Forme Sonore and to dedicate new pieces to us. Eventually, the group started to show symptoms of crisis, which is a natural outcome after residence changes and the development of different artistic interests.

The beginning of the collaboration with Edgar Alandia brought new energy and ideas to the group. This changed and revitalized the ensemble, which actually developed a long career of activity. However, I do not want to limit this text to the history of our association, of which Edgar became member and musical director for more than twenty years.

When we first met, Edgar Alandia was introduced to me as a young and brilliant composer, a positive opinion very much prevalent at the time, especially because these were times of great interest in composition in Italy. I remember very well a comment by Jesús Villa-Rojo about the incredible number of good Italian composers in the international scene, a number surely higher than those of other countries. Our first encounter gave me a very positive impression. I met a very nice and gentle person, nothing like one could expect of the role of “composer”, but at the same time prepared, with strong ideas and very accessible. We chatted about our experiences, not only musical ones, and found a great number of consonant points of view, despite our very different personal histories. Edgar had lived in a small Bolivian city until he was 19 years old, period which included his educational phase. He was part of a very culturally inclined family, some of whose members were artists with whom he could share his own interests. I soon realized that he kept strong bonds with his country, and not necessarily musical ones. This aspect did not prevent him from living many other personal and professional experiences in Europe, thanks to his curiosity and open-mindedness. Personally, I believe that having worked closely with the choreographer Maurice Bèjart has greatly helped him not to confine himself to the role of a composer of “serious” music. He has a notable ability to interchange opinions and experiences with whomever he relates to, socially or professionally: fellow composers, performers, musical technicians, students.

Back to our professional relationship, Edgar suggested restructuring our ensemble, configuring it as a double quartet – woodwinds and strings – with the possibility of including, whether necessary, voices or other instruments. He would still be the music director, obtaining excellent results. Thus, we

had a greater possibility of facing the existent repertory and stimulating new compositions.

I believe, anyway, that what is most interesting for us here is the creative aspect of Edgar Alandía's work, and its evolution. My first contact with Edgar's music was through the work *Antes*, divertimento per Schiaffini, for trombone, which he composed for me. We started a detailed analysis of my instrument's possibilities, either in a general sense or regarding the peculiar aspects of my personal technique, discussing everything that could be useful as an expressive resource – for instance, multiphonics, partial sounds, mutes, etc. Edgar explained to me the references to his beloved Andean tradition, which were part of his culture and his personality. Particularly, given my instrument's nature, the reference to Andean wind instruments was direct: the warm, sometimes aggressive timbre, but always full of expressiveness. Similarly, his tuning system, not related to the tempered system, was a strong medium of expressiveness. I must point out that many of the great jazz musicians, like Eric Dolphy, use frequently, as an expressive resource, a “wrong” intonation. Yet Dolphy may be considered an eccentric spirit, we can also cite trombonist J. J. Johnson, a musician of extraordinary technique, who, in the famous Duke Ellington's ballad, *Sophisticated Lady* (from the album *A touch of satin*), uses an imprecise intonation in order to create an adequate atmosphere to the piece.

In *Antes*, the composer uses this kind of resource in addition to some other techniques befitting the compositional practice of the time. We should clarify that this is not a kind of collage, which happens often, when composers try to mix different styles which do not belong to each other. In the case of *Antes*, two distinct elements live together in an absolutely coherent and continuous way, while the musical discourse unfolds. There is no “citation”, and he does not choose an aristocratically vegetarian option of elevating the discourse to a unique “superior” idiom. The music proceeds fluidly and continuously, in a rigorous structure with personal coherence and strong communicative value.

As I kept working with Alandía, I had the opportunity of playing his music in more complex contexts. We have worked with live electronics and with bigger ensembles, as well as with my other instrument, the tuba, always obtaining remarkable results.

In the 1990s, Alandía dedicated his time to more articulate undertakings, such as multimedia projects, which, together with theatrical and electronic

works, became part of his repertoire. I remember fondly *Perla*, *fábula triste*, which was performed at the *Salla dello Stenditoio* at the San Michele complex, head office of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Rome. The piece was written for voices and instruments, with elaborate texts and choreography. I believe this was the first work that showcased his different facets (musician, writer, choreographer), and it was actually highly successful. After *Perla*, two other examples followed: *...sottili canti invisibili* and *Oruro*, 3706 metros s.n.m., with images and much more.

I will not make a general analysis of Edgar Alandia's oeuvre here but, having worked with his music for about a decade, I have been able to appreciate the complexity and the Calvinian lightness of Alandia's thinking. I absolutely share with Alandia his concept that the primary idea of a composition is purely musical. Obviously, the reasons that induce a composer to write may be very different – life experiences, literary or aesthetic reasons, etc. – but these are but stimuli and pretexts for composing. Composition itself, therefore, proceeds freely, with purely musical signification. The attempt to associate a musical work with meanings and messages of other kinds is often a mystifying operation.

Another very frequent tic in the musician's work is the great level of attention devoted to intellectual elaboration, sometimes overlooking the effectiveness of the final results. An example is John Cage in the middle period of his activity, although in his case it was a matter of principles: theories that would attribute a significant value to any possible result of random operations. I have had the opportunity, in many circumstances, of working with composers who, describing their work, showed sophisticated algorithms and fascinating structures which indeed aroused our curiosity and desire to listen to such works. At the moment of playing or simply listening to them, my disillusion was great, notwithstanding the great intellectual attributes previously mentioned. Unfortunately, not much attention is given to the clarity of the auditory result. Perhaps, due to the process of dividing the creative roles in installments, as I have explained above, the composer may get infatuated by his or her own ideas, and enjoy the relation with the work to a point of neglecting that, in the words of Franco Evangelisti, "music only exists in the moment it sounds".

This does not apply to Alandia's music; the situation is just the opposite with his work. Before studying or listening to a piece of his, while staring at the score, I would find myself perplexed by the complexity of his writing, imagining,

erroneously, a complicated and tiresome development of the music, maybe due to my incapacity of synthesis or my allergy to some particular notations. Soon, at the moment of the execution, everything was fine, with a natural, clear and pleasant development in spite of the structural complexity. I realize I am describing Alandia's music by highlighting how it "is not", but it seems fair to me to point out the pitfalls in which he has not fallen.

I think it is also important to call the attention to Alandia's sensibility to his sound, his timbre and his primary expressive value. What I have previously said about Antes and its Andean references is always valid and prominent in Alandia's music, even if it does not bear any explicit reference to the typical colors of such tradition. Sound is the generative cell of every musical event. Unfortunately, sound may not be clearly described, but it must be established that it is the heart of music and its immediate expression is fundamental. Sometimes, the frail orgasm of notation may lead to neglecting the fundamental and significant value of sound, but this certainly does not happen with Alandia's music.

I would also like to mention another aspect of Alandia's work: his teaching side. Teaching a presumably creative subject may be a very delicate task. Often, the teacher, inadvertently, produces clones of him or herself, something that may have happened to Alandia when he was a student. A composition teacher (or of any other kind of art) uses, certainly, the legacy of his or her experience, but, over this basis, the teacher should provide the students with a fundamental technique, in addition to evaluation criteria and the means for the student's development of a working process that is compatible with his or her personality and culture.

I have met many young composers who have studied with Alandia, and I noticed how mature they were, and how well they kept their artistic differences. In 1994 and 1995 we went to Cuba, during the Special Period, invited by the Unión Nacional de Artistas de Cuba (National Union of Cuban Artists), for seminars, workshops and concerts; it was the period of the "balseros"<sup>1</sup>, and the economic situation was certainly precarious. Anyhow, we attended to our duties and I noticed how vast the Cubans' curiosity about European music was. (We can call our music European for all intents and purposes, although it was highly "contaminated". In any case, it was very distant from the Cuban

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<sup>1</sup>Translator's Note: *Balseros* were people who tried to escape Cuba, during the totalitarian regime, using improvised boats in order to reach other countries, especially the USA.

tradition.) What really called my attention were the results of Alandia's teaching, the human relationships that he swiftly established with the students, and the great efficiency achieved in only a few days of work. Certainly, these were not ex cathedra lessons, and possibly the personality of the Cubans made things easier, but I believe the most positive factor was his efficient, open and available pedagogical experience. There have been great musicians who never knew how to teach, and great teachers of a questionable musical level. Edgar Alandia, with his independence of ideas and judgment, his aesthetic value and his humanity, synthesizes in himself great pedagogical and creative aptitudes.