

LONG TUBES OF PATIENCE

Mercedes Gómez Benet

"Whether it's a house or film or chair - it must have a structural concept"
Charles Eames

PROGRESIÓN, a new recorded collection of Javier Álvarez's music, is out this month. It includes Álvarez's two pieces for harp and electroacoustic sounds that he has composed, among a large number of other works for different combinations.

I met Javier in the 1970s, when we were both students at the Mexican National Conservatory. I was soon impressed with his enormous creativity and talent, and I feel privileged to have stayed in contact with him ever since, sharing our professional development and experience. As a harpist I worked with him for both *Acuerdos por Diferencia* and *Sonoroson*, works I played at the World Harp Congresses in Dublin and premiered in Vancouver respectively.

Javier Álvarez once told me how his composition skills began. I love this story: as a child, Javier slowly opened a water faucet, and heard air running through the copper tubes inside the wall. He moved the faucet one millimeter, to enjoy different long and short sounds as he moved his hand from left to right. He experimented with, listened to, played and repeated the movements. He played with the patience and devotion, imagining where could all these sounds would take him.

Javier Álvarez grew up in a house full of architecture designs, and conversations about structure, lines, design and space. He absorbed all this curiously, thinking about it and asking questions. He grew fascinated by a garden full of trees, where birds made their own music. He observed insects, and gathered in his memory a collection of the sounds they made, long and short.

Javier and I sat next to each other (he is a clarinetist) in the student orchestra at the Conservatory, and also the Ollin Yolliztli school. This situation strengthened

our long friendship. We discovered Ravel, Puccini and Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestrations and competed for fun before rehearsals to see who could play faster arpeggios. Javier used to tease me about "the fastest shoes in the orchestra", since as we all know, a harpist needs to move the seven pedals in the instrument.

In 1978, Javier Álvarez received the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz prize from the Sociedad de Autores y Compositores of Mexico, for his piece *Amor es más laberinto*. This was premiered in 1979 by the Orquesta Sinfónica del Estado de México. We were only 22 years old, and had long hair!

During those years of study, I was fascinated by Javier's ideas at the composition workshops lead by Mario Lavista and Daniel Catán. While learning to handle orchestral colors, Javier conceived non-traditional orchestrations. As a player, I also found the study of orchestration and music analysis from a composer's point of view to be an important professional experience.

This is how my interest in composers of my generation started. It is also why I was so captivated by contemporary Mexican music. Mario Lavista, the composition professor, asked us to play music written by our contemporaries. My collaboration with Javier started there.

Acuerdos por diferencia for harp and electroacoustic sounds was commissioned by Hugh Webb in London, when Álvarez concluded his postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Music and City University. The work received a special honorary prize at the International Composition Competition in Bourges in 1998, as did later other pieces composed by him. I was lucky enough to give the Mexican premiere in 1993, and the world premiere of Javier's second harp piece: *Sonoroson* for harp and electroacoustic sounds, at the 2011 World Harp Congress in Vancouver. In *Sonoroson*, commissioned by Les Harpes Camac, Javier reveals his love for Mexican folk music, combined with a strong sense of swing, and the very accurate use of acoustic harp within the electronic material. This gives the audience the feeling of not

knowing where the sounds are coming from. They are both major works in the new recorded collection, exemplifying as they do how Mexican music has grown so rich over the last few decades.

We all know how important the close collaboration between composers and interpreters is, and I experienced it at first hand during the revision and editing sessions of both pieces, before I recorded them in Mexico. Harpists of all countries agree about the importance of this contact. The player gives idiomatic suggestions, proposing what could work best around the original musical idea, while respecting the composer. In my experience, this mutual respect and trust strengthen the piece so much, that other players sense it when they hear the music, and want to perform it too. Harpists as Marisela González in Venezuela, Ann Yeung in the USA, Cliona Doris in Ireland, and Helen Leitner (UK / Germany) have admired or adopted *Acuerdos por diferencia* for recitals and as pedagogical material. After this experience and learning about the harp, Álvarez has also written important harp parts in his orchestral pieces.

Javier always kept listening to Mexican sounds, even when he was abroad. He studied in Wisconsin for his Masters and in London for his doctorate, during which time we kept in touch by letter.

Therefore, I was not surprised to receive a cassette recording from England, with Luis Julio Toro as soloist. The tape included Javier's piece *Temazcal*, for maracas and electroacoustic sounds (1984). From the tiny tape recorder I could feel the darkness of the steam from an Indian healing ceremony, the herby aromas, the clay, the stones, the temperature changes, and great rhythmic complexity. All these sensations were recreated by Javier, concluding with the freshness of a local genre (son) from Jalisco: *El Limoncito*. Ever since, when I hear this piece live or in recordings, its strength impresses me deeply.

Over the course of his compositional life, Javier has combined his listening with immense creativity and interesting life experiences. He is sincere and passionate, works like a Trojan and is always surprising. He reads widely and often takes inspiration from other disciplines, such as when writing the score of Guillermo del Toro's film *La Invención de Cronos* (which was nominated for best incidental music).

The experience of working for the first time on a piece for an acoustic instrument (the harp), and the electroacoustic sounds designed by Javier, was a big challenge to me. *Acuerdos por diferencia* made me grow as a musician. Used to the body language and decisions taken in rehearsals with other colleagues while playing chamber music, I had to adapt my concentration to a very precise job: integrating the two aspects of this score. Javier advised me to learn the electronic part accurately, as if it was me conducting the computer. This would make the electronic part sound with me. Focusing on the internal rhythm of the piece led the music, and I was then able to match the acoustic harp notes with the transformed ones in the computer.

Audiences for whom I have performed this piece in Mexico, the US and Europe are fascinated with the story behind this collaboration. *Acuerdos por diferencia* bears the image of a traveler watching electricity pylons, from a train window. Sometimes the pylons run parallel to the railroad, sometimes they do not. The piece is about coincidences and non coincidences. Even audiences unaccustomed to contemporary or electronic music are entranced by Javier's rhythmical games.

Composers talk with admiration of Javier's tremendous creativity and capacity for synthesis. I really like how he explains that a good composer should take away the unnecessary stone in a sculpture, just as Michelangelo did. It is no surprise that he received the National Prize of Arts in 2014!

He has played with words, has fought the demons that threaten creativity, has found a place for sounds and notes in his own system - one made out of objects, folk instruments, bows, arpeggios, metal and woodwinds and vast numbers of rhythms circling in space. He has drawn lines that remind us of the universe, great and small. He is both playful and serious, disregarding the critical comments of those who would rather hear only the music our ancestors listened to. This can be shown also in the BBC radio programs "The eye of the listener", where he speaks with dignity and pride about Latin American composers.

Many years ago, I sent him some instructions for a toaster, translated into Spanish by an automatic program whose results were illogical, comical and nonsensical. Javier included this text in *Calacas imaginarias*, a cantata, which also presents texts by Teresa de Jesús and Netzahualcóyotl. It is a homage to the power of words, contrasting beautiful Spanish mystic poetry, and the absurdity of automatic translations.

I admire the boy who has pursued his obsessions. We all had to be patient, including him, writing paper letters and waiting weeks for the arrival of the mailman. I am fascinated by his decisions over which insects will sound in what piece, and which new ideas he will use to bring the music he hears inside himself to our ears. Some examples are: *Papalotl*, *Tres ranas contra reloj*, *De aquí a la veleta*, (recently premiered by the Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería in 2013), *Cactus Geometries*, *De tus manos brotan pájaros*; several pieces for instruments and electronics with musicians such as Wendy Holdaway (basoon), Cuarteto Latinoamericano, Cuarteto White, the percussion ensemble Tambuco, Vinko Gobokar with *Mambo Vinko*, John Havu (English horn), clarinetists Luis Humberto Ramos, Harry Sparnaay and Fernando Domínguez; his work for instruments such as the Korean kayagum or the Caribbean steel pan, and pieces as *Geometría foliada* or his concerti for percussion and orchestra *Música para piel y palangana* and *Jardines con palmera*.

All this is also a shining example of one of most moving powers of music: to bring us closer. One such case is Ricardo Gallardo, who performed *Temazcal* before he knew Javier personally. The two men met later, beginning a friendship which continues to this day. This connection also sparked a friendship between Gallardo and Luis Julio Toro from Venezuela, to whom the piece is dedicated. Other friendships coming from Javier's music are Cuarteto Latinoamericano with *Metro Chabacano*, *Así el Acero* with percussionist Simon Limbrick and *Offrande*, that brought Limbrick and Florence Jodelet together. The same happened with Javier's work in Sweden – this was how I met my husband Bosse Bergkvist, the Swedish radio producer who promoted Javier's music in Europe.

Javier has also designed a new music degree in Mérida, Yucatán, where I have been able to witness his work with young students. He is director of the Conservatorio de las Rosas in Morelia, where he produced an opera by Federico Ibarra, on the subject of education.

Javier asked me to write a longer text about his well-deserved collection of recorded music and his decades of non-stop composing. It is a huge honor to share part of this on Harpblog! It is almost as big as the joy I feel in having played his two pieces for harp and electronics, and in receiving such musical nutrients and friendship, in the pipes of our soul. I am honored as well to have admired – sitting in the audience - so many of Javier's other pieces. I always recognize with deep respect and admiration a composer who has intensely kept searching for his own voice.