

Musical considerations about the work

by *Patricio Mátteri*²

In the text *About "Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá"* written by Alberto Soriano (and included in this edition), the composer expresses the foundations of his creative approach that, despite being a constant in much of his work, is expressly seen reflected in the pages of this ballet:

It has not been the intention of this author to recreate an archeological rite, even less, so in the music [...].

However, it is believed by this author that by using rhythmic and dynamic elements derived from K'iche' words (the mayan language), and avoiding the most frequent technical means employed by the european musical culture, one could obtain the following results: develop an isolated and independent atmosphere [...].

It is interesting to note his desire to emphasize the use of the "rhythmic and dynamic elements derived from K'iche' words" and his eagerness to "avoid the most frequent technical means used by european musical culture" in order to obtain an "isolated and independent atmosphere".

When one analyses *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá* one can find evidence of the distancing from the musical currents that were explored in Argentina at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, such as electronic and electroacoustic music as main exponents of the genres sometimes misnamed "contemporary", which were of growing interest since the 60s, and where fellow composers such as Francisco Kröpfl, Fernando von Reichenbach, Gerardo Gandini and María Teresa Luengo would develop their musical language, in part, from their research in the electroacoustic music laboratories of the Instituto Di Tella de las Artes, the Centro Cultural San Martín or, later, the Centro

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Cultural Recoleta. These composers would also “reject” of the “most frequent technical resources used by Western musical culture” (meaning the European influence in musical composition from the beginning of the 19th century until the postwar years), but through other means of exploration. Alberto Soriano, however, and as can be seen in *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá*, would choose (be it because of his training, socio-cultural influences or research and ethno-musicological career) to put into practice other musical sensibilities when writing this ballet.

His statement of the use of the rhythm of words in K'iche' is clearly noticeable from the first pages of the work. The melodic construction is mainly rhythmic, constantly modifying two rhythmic cells transforming, augmenting, diminishing, inverting, segmenting and combining them. These two cells are seen in the first two bars of the first (in cellos and double basses) and the second scenes (sopranos, mezzo-sopranos and contraltos). But as the scenes that include the transformation of these source rhythmic cells develop, we can understand that their birth was purely vocal: the word *Xibalbá* that appears for the first time in bar 11 of the second scene. From those rhythmic sources is that Soriano constructs along the ballet a writing that is fragmented, austere, rich in instrumental timbre and devoid of harmonic density or structures of complex setting.

These rhythmic transformations also suffer from timbral variations, where not only does the composer develop new rhythmic material within the same instrumental line, but he does so also through fragmentation by timbre. As one advances in the reading of *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá*, one finds segmented phrases which are continued in other instruments that give birth, as a whole, to new rhythmic cells that will mark new sources for the development of the piece. It is possible to affirm, then, that its construction (both melodic and structural) is first rhythmic and then by timbre, or “rhythmic-timbre” as well. And although certain situations (in the text and, therefore, in the libretto) are conditioned by certain specific uses of rhythmic and melodic cells, we should reject, if one wanted to adopt that approach, the idea of posing them as *leitmotiv* or representative of a state of mind. The author is clear in rejecting these European influences in both words and musical events. We could,

however, say that there are some “themes” that belong to certain characters or “narrative situations”, but their use is going to be given, mainly, as “sound interventions” towards the last scenes of the ballet.

And as the rhythmic mutation that, together with timbral development, generates mobility within the work is clear, its instrumental construction is also remarkable.

The instrumental template needed for *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá* is notoriously ample (when taking into account the length of the scenes and the work in its entirety), making use of woodwinds by twos and threes, four horns, harp, choir, timpani and strings. But the orchestration itself does not have the purpose of exploring mixtures, but rather using “pure” timbres.

Instruments are used because of the properties of their own timbres without drawing on extended techniques or “hiding” or “modifying” the sonic properties of each instrument (avoiding, needless to say, mixing them; on one of the few occasions he uses *pizzicatti*, he does so it on the double basses’ lower registry, near the bridge -resulting in a dry *pizzicato*, without *vibrato*-). Although the work has some timbral overlays that will inevitably generate “new” sonorities (for example, unifying flute with clarinet or flute with oboe), it is clear that the composer’s desire is not that of mixture. Its sound density is, remarkably, not very dense. The instruments are used within their most comfortable registers and, in general, they duplicate the strings or the voices giving them density or depth, or highlighting the stroke or sound emission. One must remember what Soriano wrote in the introductory notes to *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá*: “the inclusion of 2 contrabassoons at the end of scene 13 denotes the need to highlight the pizzicati of the basses, which make a percussion effect in the low bass registry”.

However, one must take note of a singularity that demonstrates Soriano’s abilities as a composer: there are few cases where an instrument deviates from its “place” of “support” and becomes a soloist or has a small individual intervention, making those moments stand out. Although its timbral construction is mainly by duplication, it is presented as a masterful gesture that accustoms the ear to expect a certain sound and, when the composer wishes it -and with the resources which he decides to use-, he sets aside “responsibility” of duplication to give new meaning to the melodic line. Clear examples of this can be seen in the interventions of the clarinet in scene 5, of the flutes and oboes in scene 6, of the second violins in scene 8, or of the oboe in scene 9.

That evolutionary complexity mentioned above which is seen the ballet moves forward, also includes these resources, which will be more developed towards the last scenes.

This use of duplication or its absence creates a “block”, and can be explained in two ways. Firstly, that “there is an extensive use of duplication” (voices of the choir duplicated within the choir itself and the strings, for example) with “timbral interventions of other instruments”; and secondly, that, actually, in order to avoid a harmonic construction approach, the composer uses as a resource the tools of the timbral construction, where the instruments themselves sometimes act as “duplicators” (i.e., the “block”), and sometimes “soloists”.

And this leads us to look carefully at that harmonic construction or, rather, the lack thereof.

Throughout the history of Argentine “classical” music, composers have explored and developed a wide variety of languages. In most cases, although not in all, the influences of Western music (mainly European) were the bases of these developments. In Argentina and South America we find composers who have worked within atonal, dodecaphonic, impressionist, minimalist, electroacoustic, nationalist and popular languages. When investigating these paths, many (as in Europe) adopted modifications not only of sound but also of musical writing. New notation, development of extended techniques, atonal or arrhythmic writing, were some of the most common cases, as was the use of what I call “undeclared harmony”.

It might seem unimportant to state the absence of key signatures as one of the manifestations of a compositional language, but in the psyche of musical culture it is not a fact that should be disregarded. Declaring a harmony from which to build a piece was, for many composers whose musical languages were not tied to a harmonic central axis, constrictive. Just as the Argentine (and South American) compositional schools had its origins in the European tradition, so did the schools of performance and analysis. One way to break with these traditions (which generate unconscious preconceptions in the composition, performance and analysis of a musical piece) in order to give free rein to the evolution of language, was to eliminate the key signature, an almost psychological representation of an axis that the composer, in his language, wanted to avoid.

Analyzing in a structural way the harmonic axes of *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá* we find that, in reality, there are not any. Soriano uses other means of construction.

While I give it the name of “sound construction” to avoid the term “harmonic construction”, it is evident that the composer works with a constant superposition of sounds separated by minor and major thirds. Some could view it as a “construction by harmonic superposition” or “bi- or tri-tonality”, but in this case there are no examples that can substantiate either one of these viewpoints. Although it is true that when overlapping thirds we find parallels with bi-tonal languages, Soriano uses it with two purposes that are developed throughout the piece: the constant ambiguity, and the systematic use of hollow intervals.

One finds remarkable the almost constant use of the perfect fifth, -sometimes overlapping (often called “hollow fifth”), sometimes successive-, the construction of melodic lines by intervals of thirds, the presentation of hard and soft dissonances between nearby voices (sopranos, mezzo-sopranos) or between two instruments of the same kind (flutes, violins), parallel 5th movement, or some “false relationships” (we chose to use a name that is customary in musical analysis, which, in itself, does not they are so false), as some of Soriano’s tools in developing sound constructions.

In every scene there is clear evidence of sound or timbric construction, seeking to take advantage of the particularities of each instrument. The orchestration avoids any kind of mixture or sound closeness between voices in order to discriminate the qualities of each line and thus form sound blocks as a parallelism of their parts (for example, root-fifth-root successive in three different instruments), in opposition to the unification of each instrument into a single block (that is, smaller or closer intervals between the voices).

One cannot avoid to note the appearance of the harp in scene 7, at which time the twins perform the tests of logs with the flower of Karamak. Both interventions of the harp occur in independent sound blocks that break the flow of music. What is interesting is that in both cases the sound construction of these interventions is made on the basis of two different pentatonic scales that do not develop as such. The harp plays closed blocks of nearby notes, as clusters, in its central registry, and then a single note in its lower registry. Soriano unifies several gestures of his compositional collection in a few measures: the appearance of an instrument that has not been used (and would not be used again) that, with its particular timbre, breaks into the action - that is, a pure use of the timbre of the harp-; the sound block as a cluster, used only once in the whole work (although the flutes and clarinets are sometimes separated by third or second intervals, they are not clusters); and, perhaps, a salute to the ever growing theory of the Asian origins of the Mayan people (in its use of the pentatonic scale). Whether we agree or disagree with this last point, this striking intervention of the harp with all

its qualities, and the way in which the composer includes it, does nothing more than support our idea of sound construction and the use of timbre as a discursive object.

This method of sound construction shows the composer's clear desires to give his music a certain air of "primitivism". His observation is not casual when he rejects the idea of structuring his music from a "historical" perspective (that is, since the myth is mayan, he would compose music with mayan influence). But it is very clear that *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá* responds not only to Soriano's own musical language, but also to his desire to construct this music using means and sonorities that, in a way, refer to and reflect on the myth they relate to.

As for its structure, we can not apply the preconceptions of musical analysis either. We should note the division into scenes, typical of a ballet (which, according to how the choreographic action is developed -and recognized by the author in his texts-, may sound like independent or unified scenes) and a remarkable construction by sound blocks that, because of their repetition - and if we wished to do so- we could, in some cases, label them simple binary, repeated binary, ternary, or free form structures.

And it is fundamental to recognize that, in themselves, they are all free forms built by blocks that respond to dramaturgy and action. That is why, as the work progresses, we find musical blocks belonging to previous scenes introduced, with minimal alterations, into other scene's development.

We mentioned rhythmic cell mutations as one of the small-scale constructive procedures. But also, the whole ballet's structure is constructed by enlarging, decreasing, uniting or superimposing this source rhythmic cells that give rise to a large part of *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá*, and by the same procedure applied to the sound blocks.

Scene 14 could be considered as a small coda, since it is identical to scene 4 and is continuous to the last text spoken by the reciters, where the end of the feats of the twins is told.

In conclusion, *Juego de Pelota en Xibalbá* is a large scale piece where development takes place through compositional processes that include the variation of rhythmic cells and timbre blocks (through the use of pure instrumental timbres), the use of simple intervals both for melodic

developments and for the building of sound blocks, and a structure that corresponds to larger scale mutations of these (and many more) constituent elements.

It is a clear evidence to Alberto Soriano's artistry and skills as a composer, to his choice of a text rich in dramaturgical possibilities, to his place as one of the great creators of South American music (eternally influenced by a constant influx of European and local traditions) and his tireless desire to learn and study the origins of our musical culture.

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