

## Musical considerations about the work

by *Patricio Mátteri*<sup>2</sup>

Alberto Soriano's orchestral writing, at least when it comes to his latest works, is characterized by construction through rhythmic fragmentations, as well as timbre, texture and (to a lesser amount), harmonic development. At this point in his career, the composer was far from following his Argentine contemporaries' footsteps during the late 70s and early 80s, where atonalism, new media or mid-twentieth century European *avant garde* (always developed decades later in Argentina) were "common practice". Even so, this "common practice" would continue to develop the idea of "nationalist music" (a concept first which would gain its followers and detractors from the first years of the 20th century onward, where composers sought to incorporate typical local and regional folklore rhythms and melodies into European music's structures and forms) through new musical and stylistic treatments, mainly in electroacoustic and electronic music.

However, and even though the three parts of the *Calchaquí Valleys' Cycle* were written separately and as individual pieces, Soriano's work incorporates music themes from the northern-central part of the country through a musical language that, without fear of oversimplification, could be categorized as "minimalistic".

The composer's musical construction lies, mainly, on working through rhythmic transformations of a few cells which derive from one another, timbric variations by superimposing the "raw timbres" of the orchestral instruments, and a plain, almost static harmonic treatment, all developed towards an almost minimalistically built composition which, together with a rich in inspiration from folklore music roots, set the ground basis for the *Calchaquí Valleys' Cycle*.

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<sup>2</sup> Patricio Mátteri is an orchestra conductor, teacher and researcher, with a bachelor's degree in Conducting from the Facultad de Artes y Ciencias Musicales de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina.

As a conductor, he has worked with the orchestras: Sinfónica de San Martín, Sinfónica Municipal de Avellaneda, the Banda Sinfónica de San Martín, the Sinfónica de la Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, Académica del Teatro Colón, and Sinfónica de la Universidad Católica Argentina. He has conducted youth orchestras, and is currently director of the Orquesta Escuela Infanto-Juvenil de San Ignacio de Loyola. He is assistant conductor to the Camerata Internacional and musical director to PiùOPERA Company.

He was Junior Researcher at the Instituto de Investigación Musicológica "Carlos Vega" (FACM-UCA) under the tutelage of Dr. Diana Fernández Calvo, and today is Associate Researcher at the Instituto de Investigación en Etnomusicología part of DGEArt-GCBA (under the supervision of Mtro. Lucio Bruno-Videla, vice-director of the Institute), where he specializes in the recovery and critical edition of Argentine classical music.

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The *Cycle's* three parts' rhythmic construction is similar, and a staple of the composer's musical language. Each "movement" has a sectional development where, from the variation of a rhythmic cell, Soriano builds the thematic-rhythmic journey.

In the first section, *Ronda and Passacaglia*, said rhythmic construction has its roots on, and is dependant upon both the *ronda* form and the *passacaglia* genre. Within a "traditional" *ronda*, the melodic lines follow one another by repeating the same pattern, separated by a few beats or, sometimes, bars. It is similar to a *canon*, although the *ronda* is an earlier form, more "simple" in its melodic character.

Here Soriano works with a succession of perfect 5ths, octaves and major and minor 10ths, presented first as two eighth notes which later are augmented and diminished in length. Through transforming this rhythmic cell, the composer arrives to his version of a *passacaglia* (at the *Andante con moto* in bar 48), a section with an almost single-rhythm thematic conception, where on top of a repeated bass line (also derived from the two eighth notes rhythmic cell), there is a fragmentary succession of the same melodic and rhythmic gesture throughout the different voices of the orchestra. This "movement" is therefore fashioned in this manner, by rhythmic variation of that original material presented on those few initial bars of the *ronda* and the *passacaglia* (from the beginning of the piece through, approximately, bar 88, *Più mosso*).

The first bars of *Concert Movement* function as a rhythmic "nexus" between the past section and this new part, since the rhythmic material is the same, as is the treatment of it, as in *Ronda and Passacaglia*. However, this new section's original rhythmic material is found on the Alto Flute, which acts as a solo instrument with orchestral accompaniment, and which the composer specifically uses to allude to the sound of Andean wind instruments found on the region of the Calchaquí valleys. Although this instrument first appears on bar 17, the original rhythmic material which Soriano uses to build this "movement" is found from bar 27 onwards, *Poco meno*, where the Alto Flute has its first soloist parts. Further still, and once again on a *Poco meno* bar (bar 75), there is a rhythmic integration between the "new" material of this "movement" and the one original to *Ronda and Passacaglia*.

In *Troubadours* we find the same elements of augmentation, diminution and rhythmic variation seen on the previous two "movements". However, the original rhythmic cells belong to *Ronda...* and *Concert...*, with the exception, perhaps, of the melodic gestures written in sixteenth notes from bar 68 forward, as seen on the clarinets and bassoons.

When it comes to rhythm, *Troubadours* is a summary of the two previous sections, using almost verbatim quotations through the “movement” for its construction.

It may seem as a simplistic kind of treatment, more so if one is to take into account the almost “minimalistic” rhythmic construction technique, but is a well known Soriano trait, where variation of and structuring from small rhythmic cells is the cornerstone of his compositional procedure.

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These rhythmic transformations suffer also from timbre variations, where the composer not only works within the same instrumental line to develop new rhythmic material, but also fragments it into several timbres. A clear example of this, not only due to Soriano’s compositional language but also because of his selected structure, may be found on the *Ronda and Passabaglia*, where the same theme may suffer variation, fragmentation and be continued through all the intervening instrumental voices.

As one reads through the three parts of the *Calchaquí Valleys’ Cycle*, one will find broken musical phrases continued on several instruments which, in turn, will originate new rhythmic cells which will act as original new materials to be developed in each of the three “movements”, sometimes in a large scale, sometimes in small measures. Therefore, one can aver that his procedure for construction (either melodic or structural) is first rhythmic and then timbric, or, better yet, “rhythmic-timbric”, as one can observe in a large portion of the composer’s oeuvre.

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And as the procedure of rhythmic mutation is clear, alongside timbric deploy, both of which generate mobility within the work, the piece’s instrumental construction is also remarkable.

Unlike other works for solo orchestra by Soriano, the *Cycle* presents a “standard” instrumentation, although, one might say, somewhat limited. The woodwinds are written in pairs, with the inclusion of a contrabassoon; the brass section, despite including the traditional four horn part, lacks the use of trumpets and employs three trombones; the percussion is austere (only timpani) and, together with the string section, completes an instrumental template that surprises for its apparent simplicity (notably, the lack of harps, a more extended percussion, the aforementioned lack of trumpets -which, taking into account other compositions by the author, does not strike as odd-).

However, the use of an Alto Flute as a solo instrument in the second "movement" may be considered as a highlight, specially taking into account that this second part is, perhaps, the most characteristic when it comes to the composer's technique of "sound construction" as a compositional procedure.

The use of the instruments is due to the properties of their own timbres without employing extended techniques nor "hiding" or "modifying" each instrument's sound. Although the work has some timbral overlays that will inevitably generate new sonorities (for example, mixing flutes with clarinets or flutes with oboes), it is clear that the composer's desire is not that of mixture. The piece's sound density is, remarkably, not very dense. The instruments are used within their most comfortable and ideal registers, and the string's parts are pointedly interesting: in none of the three "movements" of the work the composer requests the use of *pizzicato*; he prioritizes sound itself over playing technique and there are few sections where he requests double strings to be played *non divisi*; the whole string family is mainly used as a rhythmic thrust and not as a melodic ensemble; and the notation of the four families (violins, violas, cellos and double basses) is arranged in such a way as to avoid the overlapping of registers, organizing the string parts by their registers (the basses always in the lower register, the cellos an octave higher from them, violins in the upper register and violas in the middle register without inversion or overlapping of voices).

This idea of the *purity of the instrument's sound* is clearly visible in the second "movement", *Concert Movement*. There, the Alto Flute, both for its sonority and for its rhythmic and melodic writing, is used as a channel for evoking traditional Andean wind instruments from the north of the country (such as the Sikus, the Flautas Traversas made of cane or hemlock and the Quenas ), granting him a solo role under which the orchestra follows.

In turn, the writing is usually by families, a characteristic often seen in the works of Soriano. Although there are duplications, timbral exchanges, continuation of melodic lines between different families, the general structuring of the orchestration is "by instrumental families". This generates the feeling of "blocks" (brass blocks, woodwinds blocks, string blocks), and although it can be observed in many ways (and with clear exceptions within the same work), there is one that refers not only to other works by the composer, but to his own compositional language in his later works: in order to avoid an approach of harmonic construction, the composer uses as a resource the tools of timbral construction.

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

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Throughout the history of Argentine “classical” music, composers have explored and developed a wide variety of languages. In most cases the influence of western music (mainly European) were the starting point of these developments. In Argentina one can find composers who have worked on atonal, dodecaphonic, impressionist, minimalist, electroacoustic, nationalist (both own and European) and popular languages. When investigating these paths, many (as in Europe), adopted modifications not only of sound but also of musical writing. Non canonic notation, development of extended techniques, atonal or arrhythmic writing, were some of the most common developments, as was the use of what I call “undeclared harmony”.

It might seem unimportant to state the absence of key signatures as a manifestation 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 constrictive for many composers whose musical languages were not tied to a harmonic central axis. Just as the Argentine (and South American) compositional schools had its origins in the European, so did the schools of interpretation and analysis. One way to break with these traditions (which generate almost unconscious preconceptions in the composition, interpretation and analysis of a musical work) in order to give free rein to the evolution of language was to eliminate the key signature, perhaps a psychological representation of a tether which the composer wanted to avoid.

While analyzing the harmonic axes of the *Cycle* in a structural way, we find that, in reality, there are none. Soriano’s construction is different.

If we were obliged to label the work in its harmonic movement, we could say that it moves constantly inside the *tonic-dominant* relationship. In the same way, to want to observe the work harmonically and look for the harmonic axes (both major and minor), we could say that they are constantly given by the basses (G, then F, then D -in the first “movement”; D, G, F, D flat, G -in the second-, and B flat, G, F, D flat -in the third-), although it would be a gross oversimplification to speak of a harmonic structuring.

We choose to give it the name of “sound construction” to avoid the term “harmonic construction”; the composer works by the constant superposition of sounds at steps of thirds (major and minor, sometimes compound intervals), perfect fifths and octaves. In this way, two characteristics of the musical language of Soriano are present: the constant harmonic ambiguity, and the systematic use of hollow sonorities.

It is remarkable the almost constant use of perfect 5th intervals (sometimes harmonic -often times called “hollow fifths”-, sometimes melodic), the writing of melodic lines by intervals of thirds and fifths, the use of hard and soft dissonances within the same instrumental families, the movement by parallel fifths, or some “false relations” (we chose to use a name that is customary to musical analysis to name something that, in itself, is not so false).

By analyzing in depth the harmonic conduction of the three “movements” of the *Cycle*, we can find techniques that justify an “academicist” approach, although it will give us only a partial glimpse of the true depths of Soriano’s abilities: there is *tonic-dominant* movement, but given by melodic movement and not a real harmonic structure; we can identify changes in tonal axes, but it would be difficult to justify the modulatory procedures used by the composer (since, to a large extent, there are none); there is the use of chord writing -to which we can grant a functionality, for example, a subdominant chord-, but they are not linked to each other in a functional way and, least of all, in the flow of the musical discourse.

The harmonic construction of the *Calchaquí Valleys’ Cycle* should be seen rather as a structuring by chords that arise from the succession of melodies, intervallic movement, or rhythmic cells within each section, all arranged through the different instrumental voices. There are harmonic gestures that, to the ear, are feigned (*tonic-dominant*, for example), but that do not present themselves as a constructive structure. The result in sound that gives form to the work must be seen from the use of rhythmic fragmentation that, through various transformations, gives rise to the timbric and chord construction that is the evolution of Soriano’s discourse and, therefore, the discursive form rhythmic-timbric-harmonic of the *Calchaquí Valleys’ Cycle*.

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In conclusion, the *Calchaquí Valleys’ Cycle* is a work of important dimensions where development takes place through compositional procedures that include the variation of rhythmic germ cells and timbric blocks (through the use of pure instrumental timbres), the use of simple intervals both for melodic developments and for the structuring of those timbric blocks, and a form that responds to mutations, both on a smaller and larger scale.

While the titles of the sections might suggest structures associated with genres of European music (such as the *Ronda and Passacaglia* or a possible Sonata form in the *Concert Movement* piece), and certain characteristics of those forms are found in those sections, Soriano’s structuring lies in

construction by block-like sections, either contrasting or derived (rhythmically and timbrally), which give fluidity to the sound and form the “movements”.

It is a work (or, perhaps, a set of three pieces) which not only elaborates from simplicity, but is filled with the richness of Argentina’s folkloric tradition, both typical features of the composer’s language in his late orchestral works.

patriciomatteri.com.ar