

Another Approach to Electroacoustic Music - by Orlando Jacinto García

At times I find myself feeling somewhat out of place at some of the electroacoustic music events where my work is presented. This is not because I do not find this genre of interest or because I am not pleased with my work or that of my colleagues, but because my aesthetic concerns, and as a result approach, are somewhat dissimilar to those employed by a number of my fellow composers who work in this world. This is not to criticize other approaches, as my aesthetic criteria for judging music is not so much based on how you make it, or what software or hardware you use, but what the resulting work is. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to describe my aesthetic concerns regarding this very important medium.

My background with technology and music goes back to my youth when I was very involved with playing the electric guitar throughout most of the 1970s. At that time I was very intrigued with the processing available (effects boxes, etc.) and had quite an array of devices for this purpose. In the early to mid 1980s as a graduate student I studied electroacoustic music much more formally in college. Although I was very taken by the medium, I was dissatisfied with the amount of time required for programming, in my case with assembly language and basic, and the somewhat limited results, the short sound fragments that I was able to create. And even though slightly later I created works using analog synthesizers and even concrete-like tape pieces and analog pieces for tape and instruments, the results, for a variety of reasons were never in my opinion, completely satisfactory or appealing. As a result I later disposed of most of these works with about another 60 works I also completed as a graduate student.

In the mid to late 80s however two events occurred that greatly influenced my future with music and technology. The first was my work with Morton Feldman, which as has become well known, reinforced much of my musical thinking. The second, and perhaps not as well known, was my coming into contact with composer and electronic music pioneer, Joel Chadabe and his developments in the field of music and technology. My meeting with Joel Chadabe in 1987 was a critical and pivotal point in my development as a composer. At that time I had been away from the medium for about 2 years as I had lost interest for the reasons mentioned above. I met Joel while participating at a festival of new music from Latin America being hosted at SUNY Albany by my friend and colleague Max Lifchitz. Joel was very attracted to my work for solo piano, *Images of Wood and Wire*, performed by Max at the festival. That combined with the fact that I was very much aware of, and had great respect for his contributions to the field of Electronic Music, lead to us quickly becoming friends. Shortly after this initial meeting Joel took me to his studio and the headquarters for his music software business, Intelligent Music. There, in addition to all of the software that he had created, he introduced me to many of the possibilities available simply by using a MAC computer, a DX7 synthesizer, a digital Sampler (12 bits in those days), and the software for editing, synthesis, etc., available at that time. Based on my meeting and subsequent contacts with Joel, I built the studio at Florida International University where I was hired shortly afterwards. The studio created in 1988 - 1989 was in many ways one of the more sophisticated studios in the South Florida area at the time.

Although, for a variety of reasons, Feldman did not create much if any electroacoustic music, he did write one work later in his life for soprano that required the soprano to pre-record two parts and then sing live along with the parts. The work, *Three Voices*, was written for and recorded by

Joan La Barbara on a beautiful recording released by New Albion Records (NA018). Feldman created the work in memory of his friends, poet Frank O'Hara and painter Philip Guston. The result of the tape and live parts is a relative uniformity of timbres (as Joan is singing with herself). The synchronization between the tape and live part also allows for some subtle counterpoint between timbres and phasing effects throughout the work. In addition to these features, Feldman explained to me that the speakers on the stage symbolized (for him) tombstones and were a metaphor for death adding another more theatrical parameter to the piece.

While in comparison to Feldman, I prefer to make subtle changes to and include slight processing of the original sound samples, *Three Voices* has had an enormous impact on my approach to electroacoustic music. For me the idea of a particular performer and/or instrument interacting with a digital multi-layered subtly processed recording of him or herself, is at the core of most of my work created in this medium. A great deal of the electroacoustic music that I have created after working with Feldman and shortly after meeting Joel Chadabe, reflects this interest. And although the software and hardware I utilize today may be more sophisticated than that which I used in the late 80s and early 90s, the works I continue to create in this medium, still reflect this approach.

As mentioned earlier, in the late 1980s I started the FIU Electronic Music Studio. During that time I had the great fortune to create works for tape and soloist for such stellar performers as Joan La Barbara, Jan Williams, Joseph Celli, and Robert Black. These works were created using the samplers and the computers available at that time. The works most often consisted of analog samples of the performers playing musical materials requested by me. These materials were then processed and assembled in the computer. Afterwards they were placed on tape, which was then played back while the soloist interacted with the recording performing musical gestures written by me.

Shortly after completing several of these works, a new colleague, Jon Christopher Nelson joined the faculty at FIU. His expertise helped expand the studio and allowed me to explore software such as Csound and Max, and for this I am very grateful. A few years later Kristine Burns joined our faculty and as a result I was introduced to SuperCollider and a host of other software including Sound Hack, Peak, etc. Although I owe much to both of these colleagues, the interesting point is that as I was working to try and keep current, between 1993 and 1999 I did not create any new electroacoustic works. A great deal of this had to do with the fact that our studio was being remodeled and upgraded at the time and perhaps more importantly the fact that the majority of my commissions and requests from performers were for solo, chamber, and orchestral works, without electronics and or tape.

In 1999 however this all changed as I was contacted by one of my colleagues in Cuba who requested a new work to be premiered at the 2000 Spring in Havana Festival of electroacoustic music. This invitation was very important for various reasons. First of all I was ready to create a new electroacoustic work for public consumption, given the time I had spent learning new software and waiting for the right opportunity to do so. In addition, this was an important venue for the presentation of a new piece. Lastly, the invitation and subsequent visit was the first time I returned to my country of birth in almost 40 years. Why and how I was able to visit my country of birth could and perhaps should be the subject of another article. Suffice it to say that it was

not something that I did without much contemplation and reflection, and that it turned out to be an extremely emotional and powerful experience.

Shortly after the invitation to my homeland, I began working on a new work for tape (CD). The new piece was based on samples recorded on DAT of me performing clarinet through a Yamaha processor. The recorded gestures were made using circular breathing, one of the few things I can still do relatively well on the clarinet. After creating the samples, I processed them using Peak, Sound Hack, and SuperCollider, finally assembling them in the computer with Pro Tools. This approach was not too different from what I used in the late 1980s with an Emax sampler, several effects processors, and Sound Designer and Digital Performer software. The completed work for the Havana festival titled, *como un coro de clarinetes celestiales* (like a choir of celestial clarinets), was finalized late in the summer of 1999 well in advance of the festival taking place in the spring of 2000.

A passionate request for a new work for violin and tape (CD) from my colleague and good friend, virtuoso violinist Robert Davidovici, to be premiered by him at the festival in Cuba, briefly delayed the premiere of the newly completed tape piece. Instead I created, *imagenes sonidos sonoros congelados* (suspended sonic images), which was then premiered by Davidovici at the 2000 festival in Havana. As with earlier works the tape part was created by recording musical gestures written by me and performed by Robert Davidovici. These gestures were then processed and assembled in the computer. The live violin part was subsequently written as counterpoint to the materials on the CD. This work was later recorded by Davidovici and released on my third solo CD, *CRI* (CD 900), to much critical success. What has followed over the last 4 years have been works using the same format and concept for some excellent soloists. This includes a second work for Davidovici, this time for viola, small hand held percussion, and CD. Other works are music for piano (or disklavier) and CD for Kathleen Supove, a work for solo saxophone and CD for Daniel Kientzy, music for solo trombone and CD for James Fulkerson and Mark Hetzler, and a work for cello and CD for Carter Enyeart. While I continue to receive commissions for and write works without an electroacoustic component, several new works for soloist and tape (CD) are in progress as is a work for just CD.

The notion of live performers playing with recordings of processed sounds of themselves is obviously not new. However what in some ways is different in my work, is the fact that the subtle differences in timbre between the original and the processed recording is what is being explored. In addition, the slow physical movement of the sound at times both from the live performer and the recorded material, adds another component. Again the physical movement of sound is not new in this genre, but the slow and subtle evolution of the physical movement of sound in counterpoint with the slow and subtle evolution of timbre, register, and density is a combination that is of great interest and somewhat different.

Although I do not discount the fact that a great work can be created when the technology drives the aesthetic, my approach in this genre is based on the fact that my aesthetic concerns drive the use of technology and not the reverse. Over the years I have explored a variety of extremely powerful software and hardware capable of making radical transformations of sound. Nevertheless, I keep returning to the basic premise of subtle and slowly evolving variations of sound as the basis for my music. As such, I only utilize the hardware and software that gives me

this result, no matter how basic and/or complex some of this hardware and software may be. The result is that my electroacoustic music is very closely related to my non electroacoustic music as slowly evolving subtle differences in timbre (as well as other musical parameters) are at the basis for all of my work. As stated at the onset, I do not feel that my approach is any better or worse than any other. It is however in many ways another approach to electroacoustic music.