

Concerto FOR THE Canaries

Ayssuragan, a symphonic poem for clarinet and orchestra, is part of a cycle of works by the Spanish composer Gustavo Díaz-Jerez, each of which is inspired by one of the Canary Islands. Following a recent CD recording with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Michael Pearce hears from the composer and Cristo Barrios, the clarinet soloist

MP: Thank you both for speaking to me about the project. Gustavo, could you tell me about the title, *Ayssuragan*?

Gustavo Díaz-Jerez: The piece forms part of a cycle of seven orchestral pieces each inspired by one of the Canary Islands. *Ayssuragan* means 'place of freezing' in the extinct language of the Guanches [the aboriginal people of the Canary Islands] and refers to the place on the island of La Palma where the non-combative population took refuge and died in the final moments of the European conquest. However, this isn't programmatic music, nor a step-by-step account of events. The historical background simply serves as inspiration for the atmosphere of the work and the orchestral writing, some of which tries to convey the coldness and fear the Guanches must have felt.

MP: What was your relationship with Cristo before the project?

GDJ: Cristo and I are both from Tenerife and we've been friends for around 15 years. I'm also a pianist and we play together in the Quantum Ensemble: a chamber music collective that is ensemble-in-residence at the Auditorio de Tenerife [Tenerife Auditorium]. We'd been playing together for a while and I wrote a piece for us called *Three Pieces* for clarinet and piano – then he asked if I'd like to write a clarinet concerto for him. I'd already written two pieces of the Canary Islands cycle [inspired by the islands of El Hierro and Tenerife] and the clarinet concerto became the work for La Palma. Cristo premiered the piece in 2012 with the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra which happened to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Debussy's birth, so there's a little quote in the middle of the piece from his clarinet *Première Rhapsodie*.

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Cristo Barrios and Gustavo Díaz-Jerez

MP: You describe your compositional style as 'algorithmic spectralism'. Could you tell me a little more about that?

GDJ: Algorithmic refers to elements of mathematics and computation, while spectralism refers to the spectralist movement of composition which emerged in the 1970s, which uses the acoustic properties of sound as the basis for musical composition. I've been interested in science since I was a teenager and I was attracted to the sonorities of composers such as like Saariaho, Lindberg and Rădulescu, who all used spectral techniques in their music.

I'm also interested in 'emergence' – the notion that a complex system is more than the mere sum of its constituent parts – as well as mathematical equations that describe nature and natural processes. I'm an amateur computer programmer and I use the computer to gather musical material drawn from the mathematical underpinnings of these processes, so the idea is that the mathematical structure that describes a particular natural process remains in the musical structure, since it comes from that structure in the first place.

Of course, you have to make compromises. You have to bear in mind what's possible on each instrument, and remember that you're dealing with real people who have to try and perform the music. As a performer myself, I think it's very important to always write from the point of view of the performer, because if your material is too complex or difficult to play then it simply has less chance of being performed.

MP: Do you think some contemporary composers lose sight of that?

GDJ: It definitely used to be like that, especially in the 60s and 70s when a lot of contemporary music was difficult to play. But now it's different. I think you can be a free, honest artist with your own voice and at the same time write sensibly for a performer. For me, this is really one of the key elements for the survival of classical contemporary music.

MP: Turning to you, Cristo – did you give Gustavo any instructions when you asked him to write the concerto?

Cristo Barrios: Gustavo already had a good idea of the things I like and can do best on the clarinet. We'd already spent a lot of time working on extended techniques in the previous piece he'd written for me, including slap tonguing and multiphonics. I really love multiphonics, which is why all the pieces Gustavo has written for me include plenty of them!

Many composers writing multiphonics are just looking for the novel sound effect, but Gustavo sees further. He uses them in a more mature, integral way, interweaving melodic lines within the harmony of the multiphonic. The same applies to slap tonguing; he's not only intrigued by the sound of the slap, but also how it can be used as part of a melodic line. Nothing sticks out. He manages to combine extended techniques with regular sounds into one smooth, continuous melodic line. The timbral framework is very clever.

MP: How much did you collaborate with Gustavo during the process?

CB: After we'd shared our initial ideas Gustavo went away and wrote the piece without any more input from me. We then worked quite closely afterwards to ensure the solo part was comfortable for the performer, particularly in terms of extended techniques and multiphonics.

One of Gustavo's main concerns was the amount of sound you could produce with a multiphonic, so we spent a lot of time finding exactly the right ones which would be loud enough to project over an orchestra.

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Around three years ago, I had the privilege of studying a PhD at the Complutense University in Madrid, researching the relationship between contemporary composers and clarinetists who worked directly to create key pieces of clarinet repertoire. These included Einojuhani Rautavaara and Richard Stoltzman, Helmut

Lachenmann and Eduard Brunner, Kaija Saariaho and Kari Kriekku, and Jörg Widmann writing a piece for himself. Although all of these collaborations were unique in their own ways, my contribution to Gustavo's creative process had a lot in common with other composer-soloist pairings – sharing initial ideas and later working with a composer to develop or adapt the solo part as needed.

I can really hear my own voice in Gustavo's concerto and I love the way he treats the wide range of colours possible on the clarinet. I hope many players continue to play it for years to come. ■

Maghek: Seven Symphonic Poems about the Canary Islands will be released on Signum Classics on 28 February 2020. More information and excerpts from the CD are available online (www.maghek.com). The project is supported by Fundación BBVA, Cabildo (Council) de Gran Canaria, Cabildo de Tenerife, and Gobierno (Government) de Canarias.



Cristo Barrios and the RSNO



Cristo Barrios and conductor Eduardo Portal

Gustavo Díaz-Jerez (b 1970): published works for clarinet and saxophone

Akhkhazu, for alto saxophone and piano (2007)
Three pieces, for clarinet and piano (2007)
Exedrae, for violin, clarinet and piano (2012)
Herramienta poética e inútil, for clarinet, cello, percussion, piano and electronics (2017)
Nabla, for violin, clarinet, horn and piano with electronics (2019)

All works published by Composers Edition
 (composersedition.com/composers/gustavo-diaz-jerez).