



Thoughts on Mikel Urquiza's Music

by Dan Albertson

When does a composer lapse from *young* or *promising* and emerge as *merely* a composer? Are only those under development of merit? Being youthful is not a guarantee of promise, nor is education a substitute for imagination, this last being the most elusive element of any artist's trajectory.

The musical persona of Mikel Urquiza arrived with a sense of maturity, then underwent a process of refinement through studies with teachers whose styles and influences he has eschewed or reconfigured to blur the obvious traces. Even the most brilliant aptitude would be for naught if left undisciplined.

Armed with a boundless, rambunctious spirit, attempts to pigeonhole Urquiza's music become instantly pointless. His aesthetic stance is less one of resistance or trailblazing than of acquiescence. Indeed, it is precisely this bowing to the flux of daily life, and its transformation, of taking something of inherently little value and making much of it, that gives his music its charm. His virtuosity is a subtle one, a juggler keeping the uneven parts of his music aloft. No need to show off here.

Is it paradoxical for one to submerge oneself in the tide and at the same moment set oneself apart from it? Complexity and simplicity, the countervailing winds of recent decades of academic music, vie within Urquiza for primacy with earnestness and trickery. Is anything *really* what it appears to be?

Whether by veering so near to the very phenomena he wishes to criticise, or at least view askance, he falls victim to them is open to interpretation. Is Urquiza's output a mockery of the extent to which society has fallen, a celebration of how it is, a plea for the value of wit in a world gone awry, a billet-doux to the here and now? Something in-between? Haggling over hermeneutics is inevitable.

No matter the perspective taken, Urquiza, rather than being served up as the prey of all that is ephemeral, mundane or trivial, and far from elevating it to cult status, treats it as a framework for building direct, declarative, often intoxicating compositions that both yield immediate, at times raunchy, rewards and stand up to the scrutiny of repeated exposure.

Three distinct strands are notable in his recent oeuvre: the use of what could be described as verbal effluvia as text sources, of multimovement forms to bring contrasts or extremes to the forefront and of quotations or semi-quotations.

Three vocal works in quick succession demonstrate contrarian approaches. *I nalt be clode on the frolt* for soprano and nine players (2018) and its natural successor, *Songs of Spam* for six voices and seven players (2019) set the blandishments, enticements and propositions that infiltrate modern spaces public and private. Their shared background aside, the two are diametric, one jubilant and gradually weary, the other almost complacent. Parallels to the baroque may be established, where

much is not what it seems and where music of sublime heights is built upon inferior, even tawdry texts.

Continuing their suite-like structures, but in a realm of its own, is *Alfabet* for soprano and three players (2019), adapting a clever text by Inger Christensen by turning away from blocks of sound and relishing the intimacies of dialogue.

Urquiza equally engages with what is and is not within the remit of instrumental music, including two contributions to the genre of the string quartet, *Indicio* (2016) and *Index* (2021), without giving into conventions. Are the humanoid coos, crinkling and shrieks of *Sex doll deluxe* for six players (2018) and the birdcalls, literal and metaphorical, of *Oiseaux gazouillants et hibou qui se retourne* for thirteen players (2020) so far apart?

In *Mis monstruos marinos* for large orchestra (2019) and *Lavorare stanca* for twelve players (2020, also home to a fearsome cadenza for triangles!), is the sea of allusions, remembered or misremembered, about blurring production and reproduction?

Urquiza is a master forger. The seeds of doubt are sown. Go in, go astray, delight in the delirium.