

# **A Multivoice for a Multiverse *the Panamerican Bassoon***

by **Ernesto Balarezo**

## ***Program Notes***

Coming from a multinational family, I always found it intriguing as a kid how our language -and the way we communicate- may be spoken/expressed in so many different ways. A sentence spoken by my mom's family could sound totally different if my dad's family would say it. It happened to me as a child that, after having traveled to Lima, Peru on vacation and went back to Caracas a few weeks later, my middle school friends would tell me that I was speaking/sounding differently. Then I started learning languages, and it happened again: I would notice how people learning languages would switch voice inflection. Even my voice would adapt to each language in a different way. I might still have an accent and horrible conjugation of verbs, but my sound would definitely change.

I have to be honest, I was not aware of all this with my bassoon voice. Yes, as youngling musicians we knew there was a German sound (influenced by the Bohemians and Italians), British sound, Russian sound or American sound, but it was too general and broad and in the end it was more a matter of taste. A beautiful and well worked bassoon sound, it is delightful, no matter the background or style. My concept of the bassoon voice goes beyond those stylistic barriers.

My awareness of the very unique way of the bassoon voice, appeared after my learning experience with Prof. Morelli. Every new student of Prof. Morelli, gets "The Book of Torture" in the welcoming package. Even though the voice section of the bassoon is in the middle of the book, working with the audios of Fritz Wunderlich singing "Dalla sua pace" or "Il mio tesoro" were one of our first lessons. The dynamic is rather straightforward: conceptualize the ideal sound of the voice, Impersonate the singer and imitate the sound as much as possible (focus, resonance, direction). "Allow yourself to experience the music in this new way. Sing! Tap into the power of your instrumental voice"

This "use" of the voice is what unifies my dissertation recital. The ideal is to be able to use different types of voices within the bassoon voice, as a traveler throughout the Americas. There are so many different realities in one continent and many different ways to express them with music: from the tango in the views of Piazzolla's perspective, contrasting with political and social issues in Chile inspiring a New York composer, passing through expressing arts of divination with EDM inspired compositional style and the visions of the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 expressed in a present day tribute, this recital is full of poetry and sounds ranging from utter lyricism to crude primitivism. This program is an effort to keep the conversation open to social issues and cutting edge music genres, while using the voice of our instrument as a unifying thread.

## **Ghost Dance - Ann K. Gebuhr.**

The native American ghost dance is part of a religious ceremony for the regeneration of the earth and the restoration of the earth caretakers to their former life. The religion experienced its fullest and most widespread practice during the late 19th century, when devastation to the buffalo herds, to the land, and to the Native American tribes was at its peak.

The Ghost Dance affected no group more than the Lakota Sioux. Several Lakota bands sent emissaries to interview its founder and priest Wovoka about his teachings. They reported in

early 1890 Wovoka's message that performing the ghost dance would bring back dead Indians, return the huge buffalo herds, create a natural disaster that would remove lost foreigners and restore the Indian way of life that had existed prior to the European influx.

The religious dance was not an incitement to war or violence, but more a passionate plea for freedom and a return to their lands and life. The treaties intended to bring peace were often ignored, and the tribes had been rounded up and herded onto reservations (usually the poorest land in the territory). Then they were subjected to near prison-camp-like regulations and restrictions and most of their requests were largely ignored or refused. Although practiced by a Lakota tribe in Canada until the 1960s and revived briefly in South Dakota in the 1970s, Ghost Dances were ended in 1890 by the US 7th Cavalry at the Wounded Knee massacre of 150 to 297 Lakota Sioux men, women and children during the dance ceremony.

Unfortunately today there are still the remains of those types of treatment, vis a vis the Dakota Pipeline invasion, with the use and destruction of Native American lands that were granted through treaties which are now inconvenient. And beyond that barely acknowledged unjust activity, the bigotry, racial hatred, denial of voting rights, and probable unconstitutional treatment of Native Americans continue to this day.

The 1989 poem by Robert Hatten conveys some of the deep imagery of the Lakota experience, and its expression carries a still living message. My bassoon voice goal is to imitate some of the chants but also keep the balance of the rhythm within the poem.

### **Infinitely Ethereal - Michele Abondano**

A very prolific and awarded Latinx composer, Michele Abondano has a characteristic of working with the experimentation of timbre. Her last research from 2022 is titled 'The Composition of Timbre: A Multidimensional Approach' which was her doctoral thesis. She experiments with different layers of timbre.

This piece is inspired by a fragment of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway: "and lit in him such a fire as burns only once in a lifetime, without heat, flickering a red gold flame infinitely ethereal and insubstantial [...]." The way in which she describes that volatile condition is the link between the constant interaction of uncontrolled and unexpected forces in a wide range of possibilities. Consequently, she approached the low register and the physical experience of the corporeal attributes of the instrument (size, shape, material) as images of the strength and power of such a passion. Following the idea of fragility, the flickering flame, to approach ethereal qualities of the bassoon's sound through diverse techniques has allowed the work to show the complexity of its movement and transformation to create unstable and unique timbres.

My bassoon voice has to follow that principle. A controlled freedom, with delicacy to apply the overtones but also a light tonguing for the passages that requires double tonguing.

### **Whoroscope - Valeria Rubi**

A highly experimental piece has a strong connection with the previous work because of the use of poetry and the landing of some notes in a similar way as Infinitely Ethereal. In this work by Mexican composer Valeria Rubi, the palette of sounds offered by the electronic accompaniment enriches the message that only the bassoon could not achieve. Beckett's work, even though he was from Ireland, is more connected to France and the surrealist movement, than anything else. The work does not have form and little groups repeat itself through the piece. My voice is to give conductivity to the main flow of words in the tape.

## **Manteia - Peter Van Zandt Lane**

Using a broad palette of sampling, signal processing, synthesis, and the natural sound of the bassoon, this work pays homage to the electro acoustic tradition as well as EDM. This recital will showcase two of the four works that are part of the Manteia Suite: Hydromancer and Pyromancer.

For **Hydromancer**, the composer uses a water droplet sampling technique that is almost an ostinato where the bassoon sound is flowing over. From m.1 to m.18, the sound is light and almost as transparent as water. However, from m.20 both sounds, bassoon and electronics, become more *fluid*. The condensation dissipates on m.43 and everything becomes lighter again. My fascination with this compositional style is the opposite to other voices in this recital. There is no freedom or *cantabile* as in Piazzolla or August, but there is a feeling of nature and symmetry that is also a great musical outcome. By m.114, everything gets denser, like very heavy waters. Full circle is on m.136, and we end it as we started. Even if we started again, the audience won't feel the difference.

On **Pyromancer**, everything becomes more earthy. Pyromancy is likely the first form of divination and was one of the first religions in many ancient civilizations. The audience will feel several sounds associated with fire. Charcoal, crackling woods in the fireplace, burning electronics. The use of the multiphonics here is as a white noise to control the fire and give the audience a path to feel the electronic sounds.

## **Stand Up With Me - Gregg August**

Inspired by the poem "The Flag" which was part of the book "The Captain's Verses" by Chilean author Pablo Neruda, this work is a beautiful anthem to peace but also to keep fighting against the oppressor. I felt it was a great contemporary complement to the Ghost Dance in this recital and it also has a great amount of dance within itself. Mr. August is a performer and composer in New York and his last set of works, Dialogues on Race, is a Grammy nominated album. 'Stand Up With Me' was commissioned by Prof. Gina Cuffari.

This is a highly fueled avant garde jazz style work. However, it is well metered and leaves zero margin to improvisatory sections. It's a rigorous jazzy work, if anything. It has a beautiful "interlude" for voice and after speaking with the composer, he recommended the bassoon player to sing that section. It is challenging but it is part of what the voice can work in this recital.

## **Vals Venezolano - Paquito D'Rivera**

In my final recital, I had to bring a little bit of my roots to the table. I always wanted to perform this transcription made by Marco Rizo, approved and published by Mr. D'Rivera, but for some reason I never had the opportunity. Antonio Lauro, the person who Paquito D'Rivera dedicated his *Vals Venezolano* to, was a prolific classical guitar composer from Venezuela, son of Italian immigrants. His music has survived all political reckoning and is one of the little things that keeps peace and understanding among the enemy lines, because both sides of the political spectrum in the Venezuelan social unrest, love Maestro Lauro's music. His music has the final effect we performers most want with our art: a unifying sense of peace. Paquito D'Rivera reimagination of Maestro Lauro's *vals* style is superb. Begins with a classic intro on the piano but almost immediately delivers the main theme to the bassoon.

## **Le Grand Tango - Astor Piazzolla**

Composed originally for cello and dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich in 1982 (he premiered it in 1996, 4 years after Piazzolla's death) this work by Astor Piazzolla is the matrix to understand how Piazzolla saw the *arrabal's* tango. Written as a *petit concert* or *sonatine* in three movements, Le Grand Tango is an often performed piece outside of the cello family. Violinists perform it regularly as a colorful addition to recitals. However, that is not the case with bassoonists. There are a couple of recordings around the globe, but is not a recurrent recital piece. Which is odd since the piece is idiomatic for bassoon (for the most part) and has a great balance in colors and timbres.

As in Baroque and Jazz, Tango has a certain level of stylistic knowledge that is good to manage before studying the piece, otherwise it will not sound authentic. I had to make plenty of stylistic decisions while learning it. For instance, the double stops on m.13 and m.15 being a G-C dyad, can be imitated by the bassoon with a Lowest C harmonic. Since we bassoonists are making our own personal arrangements from the Cello part, there are places of impossible double stops to imitate as in the section of m.25. In this section it would be better to hold on to the lower melodic line to help the harmony with the piano. Some of the core interpretative tools for Piazzolla's tango is the *fraseo* (phrasing). Places where rhythm can be manipulated around the whole work, will add dramatic expectation as in the popular Argentinian tangos by Carlos Gardel or Anibal Troilo.