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# alcides lanza's Musical Awakening in Buenos Aires

## *An Interview*

Jonathan Goldman

alcides lanza (b. 1929, Rosario, Argentina) needs no introduction in Montreal. Author of many compositions notably for mixed instrument and tape or electronics (such as the *arghanum* cycle, the concerto for midi piano and orchestra, and also the many theatre pieces written especially for his wife, the singer Meg Sheppard). His tireless concert organizing, and his founding of an independent record label, Shelan, have made him an important part of Montreal and Canadian musical life for the last 35 years.

Having moved from his native Argentina to New York in 1965, he worked at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center from 1965 until 1971. It was in that year that he was appointed professor of composition at the Faculty of Music (now Schulich School of Music) of McGill University in Montreal. From 1974 to 2004, he was director of McGill's Electronic Music Studio and is now its Director Emeritus. lanza continues to have a very active international career as a pianist and conductor specializing in the avant-garde repertoire. His programs reflect his particular interest in the music of the three Americas.

lanza's activities in support of contemporary music are varied: from 1983-1991, he organized the McGill contemporary music festivals. In addition, he co-directed — with Bruce Pennycook — the Electronic Music Studio's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary festival in December 1991, and the ICMC computer music conference in October of the same year. Also, lanza was director and co-founder —

with Claude Schryer and John Oliver — of the group g.e.m.s. (Group of the Electronic Music Studio), a very active performance ensemble dedicated to the promotion of compositions involving instruments, interactive electronics and musical theatre. The debut concert of g.e.m.s. took place on October 4, 1983, and with their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert series, in October 2003, the group ended a successful career leaving a legacy of more than a hundred premières and a rich discography.

In June 2003, the Canada Council for the Arts awarded alcides lanza the 2003 Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award.

Much can be said about his support of Latin American composers in Montreal over the last decades, but in keeping with the theme of this issue, in the following interview, recorded in December 2006, alcides speaks about his early education, and especially his experience in Buenos Aires at the CLAEM (Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales), the music centre of the Di Tella Institute (cf. article in this issue by Esteban Buch).

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**Jonathan Goldman:** Where and when were you first exposed to avant-garde music?

**alcides lanza:** It must have been directly in Buenos Aires, after I left Rosario, in 1954 or 1955. Even though I was involved in music in Rosario, and was even trying to compose, I don't think I was exposed to new music at that time at all.

**J. G.:** You arrived in Buenos Aires in 1954 or 1955, but you only started studying at the Di Tella Institute some 10 years later. What were you doing in the interim?

**a. l.:** The renowned Russian piano pedagogue Ruwin Erlich (1901-1969) started a piano class in Rosario, and I began studying with him: he would come every week or every other week. He had a group of talented young pianists there, including Arminda Canteros, who was older, but was nevertheless studying as part of Erlich's selected group of advanced students. After about six months of these classes, he recommended that I move to Buenos Aires. So I came to Buenos Aires, with the main goal of studying piano. But due to my interest in composing, Erlich sent me to see Jacobo Ficher (1896-1978), another Russian immigrant, a very prestigious composer, but very conventional. He would reluctantly talk about free atonal music. In a way he was a late Romantic — but an important figure. He's even in the Arizaga Encyclopedia.<sup>1</sup> I don't think I lasted more than two classes with him, it wasn't for me. But I developed a good rapport with some of his other students. One of the first premières I performed was the

1. [Ed.] Rodolfo Arizaga, *Enciclopedia de la música argentina*, Buenos Aires, Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1971.

3 *Preludios para Piano* (1951) by Marcelo Koc (b. 1918), an Argentinean composer who was studying with Ficher. He dedicated the piece to me. So that was one little introduction to new music. About a year or two later, I found Julián Bautista (1901-1961), the Spanish composer who was my teacher for three and half years. I studied with him until 1960: counterpoint, harmony, musical form, and so on, and I was also composing under his guidance. It was then that I analyzed Bartók for the first time, and many other works. It was my first exposure to these things since I never really went to music school or university to study music: all my studies were conducted privately. Then Bautista left for Puerto Rico, because Juan José Castro (1895-1968) was to create a music school there, and he was extremely well organized: he convinced Bautista to move to Puerto Rico to teach composition. As a result, Bautista sent me to Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983). I took three classes with Ginastera at that time, and then decided it didn't appeal to me. He had just attended an ISCM meeting in Europe, and was at that time speaking very critically of new music, including rather harsh remarks against Luigi Nono. Ginastera was too traditional for me: I needed something different. But studying with him was a way to collect my monthly stipend from the *Fondo Nacional de las Artes*. As soon as summer arrived, I decided not to return to Ginastera. But later, when the Di Tella was founded three and half years later,<sup>2</sup> then I learnt a lot from Ginastera... Perhaps I had matured in the interim.

J. G.: When you entered the Di Tella in 1963, was it on the strength of your compositions?

a. I.: Absolutely, it was a Latin-American wide competition, and I must have submitted the pieces I had written in the 1950s: *concierto de cámara* and *plectros I*. And it was *plectros I* that probably got me the Di Tella fellowship: I wrote it as a joke for [Gerardo] Gandini<sup>3</sup> (b. 1936) on his birthday. He and [Armando] Krieger (b. 1940) played it, and Ginastera took a liking to this piece. It was Ginastera who found me a publisher for it, since Barry was his publisher at the time. He also took the recording of *plectros I* with him on his lecture tours of the United States. This piece already looks like an Alcides Lanza piece: it was my first attempt at a graphic score — at theatre music — because I wrote things in there that are impossible to play, as a joke to Gandini. It is for two pianists, using one or two pianos, with one pianist playing on the keyboard, and the other only playing on the strings inside the piano. The strings are divided into four sectors, written on four lines. Not too bad for 1962 as a beginner! [laughs]

J. G.: So you knew Gandini at that time?

a. I.: Yes, I already knew Gandini and Krieger because of my connections with students of Jacobo Ficher. Around 1956 the need arose to create an association

2. [Ed.] Whose music branch, the CLAEM, had Ginastera as its director.

3. [Ed.] Cf. interview in these pages.

of composers. It was called the *Asociación Argentina de Jóvenes Compositores*, and they had many members. The group had no aesthetic guidelines: they had all tendencies in it. It still exists today, but they've removed the 'jóvenes' from the name [laughs]. But almost immediately, Gandini and Krieger withdrew from it, and they tried to get me out as well. They got [Antonio] Tauriello [b. 1931] out of the organization, but I stayed with them for about two more years, producing concerts and so forth. After that, we created a smaller group with Krieger, Gandini, Tauriello and me. It was originally called *Agrupación Euphonia*, and we produced concerts at a professional level that were broadcast by the national radio. But Gandini, as usual, got tired of the situation and the name; he needed a change, so one day he came to have coffee, and told us that we were to change the name to *Agrupación Música Viva*. Then Mariano Etkin (b. 1943), who was only 15 years old at the time, came to a meeting looking to become a member, and although we accepted to play one of his pieces, we didn't accept him as a member yet. It was already a typically Etkin piece: it was scored for something like piccolo and double bass! We sent him to study with Guillermo Graetzer (1914-1993), and he came back two years later saying, "Ok, I studied. Now will you accept me?" So we did.

**J. G.:** That reminds me of the way the very young Christian Wolff entered Cage and Feldman's circle. In any case, when you entered the Di Tella in 1963, was Gandini already teaching there?

**a. I.:** Yes, he had been a student of Ginastera, like Krieger and Tauriello, and at the CLAEM he became Ginastera's assistant. So in a way, Gandini became my teacher.

**J. G.:** Which is odd, since he was already a friend and colleague at that time.

**a. I.:** Yes, but he was really the assistant to Ginastera. He prepared class materials, played examples at the piano, and did some analysis for us.

**J. G.:** Did you have any contact at this time with Juan Carlos Paz<sup>4</sup> (1897-1972)?

**a. I.:** Yes, even earlier than that, but only as a pianist. I was active playing concerts, and Ruwin Erlich used to recommend me to perform new music. Then came the encounter with Mauricio Kagel (b. 1931). This must have been in 1958. Kagel called me on the telephone, introducing himself, and telling me that he was a student at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, and that he was in charge of the cultural programming for the students' association. He was organizing a two-year long cycle of concerts devoted to music of North America. He was looking for a pianist to play Roger Sessions' second piano sonata (1946). Others had turned him down, since it was a very difficult piece. I went to visit

4. [Ed.] Cf. article by Esteban Buch in this issue on the rivalry between Ginastera and Paz.

him in barrio Belgrano, where his parents lived, and I played for him: I probably played Webern's *Variations*, op. 27; in any case, I passed the test! Can you imagine? We were all so young! So I performed the Sessions' sonata in concert. And I believe that Kagel was also part of the *Agrupación Nueva Música* with Paz. I think they also hired me to perform the Sessions' sonata. In the second year, Kagel hired me once again, this time to perform a piece by George Perle: a set of twelve dodecaphonic pieces, whose title I have forgotten. That was a lot easier than the Sessions! That put me in contact with Paz. From then on, Paz would invite me to perform in *Agrupación Nueva Música*, and one piece that I performed there was Paz's *Música 1946* (1945-7), which I later recorded. It's like the Sessions: horrendously difficult! This was a learning experience for me. I played that piece for Paz in his apartment on perhaps four occasions, and he would explain the piece to me, in what almost amounted to an analysis of it.

**J. G.:** For Paz you were a pianist, and not a composer.

**a. I.:** Yes; for him, only *his* students were composers! Anyone else was merely an apprentice (he used to call us *aprendiz de compositor*).

**J. G.:** So before you began at the Di Tella, you were already familiar with the music of Webern and Schoenberg?

**a. I.:** Yes. Perhaps not the string quartets or the orchestral music, but certainly the piano music. And in Buenos Aires, I would go to all the new music concerts, principally [Paz's] *Nueva Música* concerts.

**J. G.:** At the Di Tella Institute, you studied with people like Messiaen, Copland, [Riccardo] Malipiero, Dallapiccola and especially Maderna. Let's start with Messiaen, did he teach analysis, as he did at the Paris conservatory?

**a. I.:** Yes, his plan had been to compress his year-long analysis course into the space of three months. He asked Ginastera to let him teach 6 days a week, beginning at 7:00 in the morning. For us 'latinos', that was very difficult! It was a real scandal: Messiaen comes to town, and no students show up! Messiaen's reason for teaching so early was that he used to wake up at 4:30 in the morning to go and study birdsongs in the *Parque de Palermo*. So he would have breakfast before seven and be ready to teach. But we used to only go to bed at 3am! So we found a compromise. He ended up teaching at something like 9 or 10 in the morning, and only 5 days a week, both mornings and afternoons. The mornings were devoted to Indian ragas and talas. That was really dense! It was really hard to remain conscious! On the other hand, the three or four hours of the afternoon were devoted to the analysis of his own music. It was really intense. I have kept my notes to this day. I used to sit next to Krieger, with

whom I had a piano duo: Krieger-lanza. We would pass notes to each other... I made the observation in one of these notes, scribbled in the margins of my notebook that Olivier Messiaen was always dressed exactly the same: same shirt, same tie, same socks: nothing was changed. I asked Krieger whether Yvonne Loriod laundered his clothes every night!

**J. G.:** But presumably Yvonne Loriod had no time for laundering at that time either, since she was giving you piano workshops!

**a. l.:** Yes, the Di Tella arranged — together with the Mozarteum Argentino — for Loriod to present a two month long seminar for a select group of pianists on contemporary piano music, and I was among them. It was another fellowship that I applied for and obtained. In that group was also Miguel Angel Estrella [ca. 1931], a pianist who went on to some renown. I prepared Bartok's Sonata for 2 pianos and percussion with Loriod, as well as Webern's *Variations*, Schoenberg's opus 11 and some of Messiaen's music. Maybe some Debussy, too, but nothing older than that.

**J. G.:** What was it like to have someone like Copland at the institute? He was clearly a composer with a less adventurous sound world than most of the other lecturers at the CLAEM.

**a. l.:** He was invited to give weekly public lectures, not only for the Di Tella students. They were mostly on North American music, and strangely enough, I got my first introduction to computer music from Aaron Copland! In that year, 1963-4, one of the lectures was on electronic and computer music: he played computer music by Lejaren Hiller (1924-1994)<sup>5</sup> from the University of Illinois. I take my hat off to Copland for his adventurousness. Copland is also the man who got me out of Argentina. We used to get invited to Ginastera's house for empanadas,<sup>6</sup> and on one occasion, Copland was invited as a guest of honor. I had shown Copland my pieces, and he asked me what my plans were after finishing at the Di Tella. I said I didn't know. He told me about the Guggenheim fellowship. I said that I had already applied twice for it, and that both times I had been unsuccessful. He said that I should apply once more, putting his name as a reference and... I got the Guggenheim. Once I got to New York I realized that if you were recommended by Copland, it was practically a *fait accompli*! But Copland was not truly an instructor at the Di Tella. He did meet however all the Argentinean students privately. I had shown him my French horn quartet, which at that time was only half completed, and my three songs, with an English text, written by me, even though I didn't speak English at that time.

**J. G.:** Tell me something about Malipiero. He was also your teacher, wasn't he?

5. American composer of computer music.

6. [Ed.] Argentinian meat pies.

**a. l.:** Riccardo Malipiero taught exclusively 12-tone music. Malipiero was particularly interested in interacting with the young composers; he would go to the *Agrupación Música Viva* concerts, and *Música Viva* eventually commissioned a piece from him, *Preludio, adagio e finale* (1963) which was premièred by them in the Teatro San Martín in Buenos Aires. He wrote it for free! But it was commissioned by Gandini, Lanza, Tauriello and Krieger.

**J. G.:** Maderna is also someone that we don't necessarily associate with electronic music today, and yet he too was invited to the Di Tella to speak about this subject.

**a. l.:** He was hired to teach electronic music, but the laboratory wasn't ready upon his arrival. At that time, an electronic music studio needed to have something like four Ampex tape recorders. These machines arrived, but they forgot that the electrical current in Argentina runs at 50Hz rather than 60Hz, as is the case in North America! So the machines were running too slow, and they couldn't repair them in time. During the three months that Maderna was at the Di Tella, he was also conducting at the Teatro Colón, including one month of exclusively contemporary music with the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, in which he performed, among other things, Stockhausen's *Gruppen*. I was working then as the co-répétiteur for the ballet at the Colón, and they engaged me to write the program notes for Maderna's four concerts.

**J. G.:** If the equipment wasn't ready in the electronic music studio, what was he teaching?

**a. l.:** We spent 4 or 6 weeks listening to LPs, and analyzing electronic music in almost emotional terms. We developed a wonderful friendship. He was interested in my French horn quartet (*cuarteto IV* (1964)), especially my working with the idea of multiples, i.e., four of the same instruments. He was also interested in my use of clusters and perhaps the placement of the performers in separate corners of the hall. At that time, he was working on *Quadrivium*, so he was also very much interested in spatialisation.

**J. G.:** Three features which strike me about your music are the presence of theatrical elements, a preference for a mixture of instruments and electronics, and spatial notation. In your work, graphical notation without barlines predominates. Would you trace that to the Di Tella, or rather to your New York period?

**a. l.:** In my case, it was all there before the Di Tella: you only need to look at my first piece in the *plectros* series, from 1962. There you can already find graphic notation, a distaste for capital letters, fooling around inside the piano,



working outside equal temperament. The only thing missing is the electronic element. And there is in it a 'lanza sound world' as well. [...]

I graduated from an 'extended' high school with a degree in electronics: that's what I studied from age 11 and a half to 17; I was the youngest student ever to graduate from the *Escuela Industrial de la Nación Rosario*. Then I studied architecture for a year and a half, before dropping out without telling my parents. Six months later, I returned the money they had sent me for university fees, and decided to devote myself entirely to music, as a pianist. But I already had the study of electronics under my belt. I had also been practising technical drawing for 8 years. You know, I do all my composing on transparent paper, and I draw all my staves and lines myself: I don't use pre-lined paper for writing music. I write directly in ink. All those elements were there long before I knew about the Di Tella. I even already had tape recorders — albeit very primitive ones. I was fooling around with recordings then, without knowing that I was making electronic music. For the first years of recording at the Di Tella, since the Ampex tape recorders weren't working, they used my own Grundig, which I had bought second-hand, but which was at that time—in 1963—a very high-end technological machine. It had 3 speeds: 7 1/2, 3 3/4 and 1 7/8 inches per second. It was 1/2 track monophonic, so you could turn the reels over and work on the other track. And I discovered speed variation very early on. The Grundig had an excellent recording mechanism.

**J. G.:** Can you tell me more about your first electronic music projects?

**a. I.:** One of my first experiences in making electronic music was working with Armando Krieger, because we played together in the Krieger-lanza piano duo and we had pieces with electronics in our programs. We were preparing a tour of Argentina, and later, after the Di Tella, a Latin American tour. Krieger wrote his piece *Contrastes*, for two pianos and tape, so that we could play it at those concerts. It was his idea, but he knew nothing about tape music. Since the CLAEM lab wasn't ready, we used my Grundig to make recordings, using the Di Tella piano. Then I spliced the tape according to his instructions: it was my first experience making tape music, but it was for Krieger's piece, rather than my own. I think that's cute! It must have been sometime near the end of 1963.

**J. G.:** At this time did you know about Darmstadt?

**a. I.:** Yes, through reading; and via the German consulate. At the time, Krieger and I had a radio program on *Radio Municipal*, which was housed in the Teatro Colón, and this was from 1960 until 1963; our own weekly program of new music. The theme music we chose for this program was taken from Penderecki's

string quartet (1960). In order to get music for our radio broadcasts, we would go to the Polish, French, German, American and other embassies and ask them for LPs. The first time I heard Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphonie* was on an LP borrowed from the library of the French embassy.

**J. G.:** You left Buenos Aires in 1965 on your way to New York on a Guggenheim fellowship. Why New York?

**a. l.:** I used to meet with Mario Davidovsky (1934) at a café on Calle Florida,<sup>7</sup> and we would always dream of how to get out of Argentina: we were both convinced that Europe was not for us, as it had been for Kagel, for example. We wanted to go to North America. I had been attracted by the music of certain composers living in the USA, like Varèse, Harry Partch and Charles Ives; at that time very little new music was recorded. But the *Biblioteca Lincoln*, which was sponsored by the American embassy, was a useful resource. The *Biblioteca Lincoln* (Florida 947) was right across the street from Muchnik Editores where I was earning a living supervising the translation — from English to Spanish — of the dialogue bubbles of comic books like Superman. Then, when the Di Tella was founded, it opened in either the same building or the one right next to it, I don't remember which. And now in place of the institute, there is a shoe store!

Davidovsky suggested I come to Columbia University to study with [Vladimir] Ussachevsky (1911-1990) who had been his teacher. I was following in the footsteps of Davidovsky, and Ussachevsky became an important mentor for me. Then he gave me a job. So, after studying with him for one year, I stayed on for several more years working as an instructor. Many of the Latin American composers, like Edgar Valcárcel (Perú, 1932), Manuel Enríquez (México, 1926-1994) and Marlos Nobre (Brazil, 1939), studied electronic music under my guidance. After that, from New York, I came to Montreal in 1971, when Bruce Mather (1939), whom I'd met at a festival in Washington, suggested I apply for the position in composition at McGill University. I was successful so I moved to Montreal...and I am still here!

(Montreal, December 2006)

7. Major commercial street in downtown Buenos Aires.