

Personal Transformation in Florentín Giménez's Symphony No. 1/ *Concertante para piano en Re menor "Metamorfosis"*

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Florentín Giménez stands as one of the most prolific Paraguayan composers of academic and popular music, and as one of the last living representatives of the subjective nationalistic school of composition in Latin America. Giménez's *Concertante para piano en Re menor*, later designated Symphony No.1 "*Metamorfosis*," is a symphonic composition of programmatic nature retelling aspects of the Iberian and Guaraní colonial encounter, the biological and cultural *mestizaje* process, and the creation and adoption of the Paraguayan *polca* and *guarania* rhythms as musical and cultural representations of Paraguayan identity. In fact, as part of the program notes for the June 2006 performance of this work, the composer indicated that "the creative process of this composition runs through the transforming evolution of Paraguayan music, from the Spanish [musical] sources to its definite [current] affirmation... [and conformed by] the Paraguayan musical nationalism with the spirit of our most deeply-rooted musical genres: the *kyre'ỹ* and the *guarania*." (Giménez 2006) Through this presentation we will observe that not only Giménez's *Concertante para piano* offers a subjective musical account of history and social and cultural identity, but that the composition portrays a personal testimony of the composer's own journey and quest for the articulation of his [Paraguayan] identity through a personal and musical metamorphosis.

Biographical Sketch

After moving from Ybicuí to Asunción in 1940, Florentín Giménez studied music theory, solfège, guitar, clarinet, percussion, and piano at the Asunción Police Academy, where unprivileged children and youth at risk received free musical instruction by members of the Police Academy music band. An already accomplished pianist by the late 1940s, Giménez organized his own *orquesta Ritmos de América*, and in 1950, his *orquesta típica*, following the Argentine model of tango orchestras. The ensemble became a favorite at local social and dance events, performing the popular music of the times (Argentine tango, Brazilian sambas, American fox-trot, Caribbean rumba, Mexican boleros and corridos, and Paraguayan *polcas* and *guarantias*). In 1956 he moved to Argentina, where he was actively involved in popular music, playing for and organizing various ensembles. After attending a musical performance at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, Giménez felt a personal call to study and specialize in music as an academic composer. Between 1956 and 1969 he studied music theory at the Carlos López Buchardo conservatory in Buenos Aires and composition with the Italian pianist and violinist Cayetano Marcolli. While in Argentina, Giménez also composed popular music and worked as an orchestra arranger and conductor for a number of recording

studios in Buenos Aires. In the late 1960s, Giménez became internationally known when one of his most popular songs, *Muy cerca de ti* (“Very Near You”), composed in 1957, was recorded by several local and international musicians, such as Argentine singer Mercedes Sosa, the Mexican *Trio Los Panchos*, Puerto Rican singer-songwriter José Feliciano, and the American singers Andy Russell and Nat King Cole. In 1969 he returned to Paraguay, and in 1973 became assistant conductor of the Asunción Symphony Orchestra. After serving as the symphony’s main conductor from 1976-1989, the Paraguayan Senate designated Giménez as “Composer in Residence of the City of Asunción,” in 1990. In 1997 he became founder and director of the National Conservatory of Music, and in 2004 he organized and founded the National Symphony, which he conducted until 2008, when he retired.

His musical output includes seven hundred popular songs, preludes and fugues for piano, a Paraguayan folk mass, the opera “Juana de Lara,” (based on a historical figure) six Paraguayan zarzuelas, two instrumental suites, four concertos (piano, violin, violoncello or viola, and two guitars), two symphonic poems, and eight symphonies. A prolific writer, Mr. Giménez has also published books discussing Paraguayan music and folklore, and several novels. Generally speaking, the musical works of the composer could be approached and studied from three distinctive, though not rigid, periods: a popular song period, beginning in 1943; a chamber music period, beginning in 1956; and a large-scale works and symphony period, beginning in 1963. Giménez has recognized that his compositions have been highly influenced by the popular songs and symphonic works of Paraguayan composer José Asunción Flores (1904-1972) and by the techniques followed by 19th century European composers, such as Albéniz, Grieg, Mahler, Sibelius, and Smetana. In recognition to his work promoting academic and popular music within the frame of a Paraguayan cultural identity, Giménez has received two honorary doctorates from Paraguayan universities and the *Orden de Comendador*, the highest recognition awarded by the Paraguayan government to a civilian. Since his retirement Florentín Giménez has been systematically revising, transcribing, and copying his works using music software. In August of this year (2012), he was finishing his latest Paraguayan zarzuela, and entertaining the idea of sketching his ninth symphony.

In June 2010, after my first series of meetings with him, I learned that most of his compositions remained unpublished and relatively unknown to local and regional musicians, orchestras, and music schools. In my view, Florentín Giménez’s academic musical works represent the last connection with a past generation of Latin American nationalist composers of the stature of Carlos Chávez, Alberto Ginastera, and Heitor Villa-Lobos. Consequently, I believe that studying, performing, and promoting his music may enrich our understanding of Paraguayan and Latin American music, as well as musical and cultural identity.

Concertante para piano in Re menor “Metamorfosis,”

Composed between 1960 and 1969 and dedicated to his young son, Florentín Dario, the one-movement *Concertante para piano en Re menor “Metamorfosis,”* was premiered in 1981 in Asunción, already transformed as a four-movement piano concerto: the *Concierto para piano en Re menor “Metamorfosis.”* In 2005, the work was revised [the second movement (Andante) was expanded] and renamed *Sinfonía No.1/Concertante*

para piano en Re menor "Metamorfosis," In this work, the composer plays with harmonic ambiguity between the tonal areas of d minor and D major, transforming motivic rhythmic and melodic units into themes, which are continually developed throughout the work. Not only a musical and historical transformation takes place, but also an account of the composer's personal metamorphosis is revealed.

I – Andante semplice

In the first movement, *Andante semplice*, Giménez uses a strict sonata form approach, while emphasizing Iberian-type melodies and corresponding musical gestures. The composer portrays through music the influence and dominance of Spanish culture during colonial times. In fact, using the piano as the main narrator, different characters and stories are introduced by different instruments and/or a combination of the wind and brass families. For instance, after a timpani entrance, the full orchestra plays the main musical theme while the piano answers punctuating ascending chords in D minor. Giménez also uses the timpani and the persistent sound of the D minor chord to paint the image of colonialists coming to the new world and encountering natives playing drums at a ritual. Following a series of musical phrases played by the woodwinds and evoking the way in which the piano is treated in Manuel de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, the soloist presents an Iberian theme, later engaging in dialogue with the orchestra.

II – Andante

As a type of instrumental interlude, an early version of the *Concertante* had a shorter second movement, which lasted about three and a half minutes. Imitating the approach to the middle movement of instrumental concertos from the Baroque period, Giménez intentionally wanted to equate time or period (the 18th century) with Paraguayan colonial history and the European music of the times. In 2005, by request of Brazilian pianist Miriam Braga, who in 2006 performed the *Concertante* in Asunción and in Tatuí, Brazil, Giménez expanded the original version of the second movement. In the newly developed *Andante*, Giménez follows a more strict approach to theme development, introducing subthemes and featuring extended solo passages for the piano. Because at this time Paraguayan history is still undefined and unwritten in the mind of the composer, Giménez creates an atmosphere of sonic expectation by displaying and interrupting harmonic sequences in the piano.

III – Allegro moderato

In the third movement, *Allegro moderato*, a contrapuntal and harmonic metamorphosis of musical themes takes place. Announcing the imminent fate of the Guarani culture, a French horn imitates the sound of the *turú*, a native wind instrument used by the indigenous communities of Southern South America. Then, representing the encounter of Iberian and Guarani cultures, asymmetric rhythms are introduced by the orchestra: the transformation has begun. Suddenly, painting the fusion of the two races the piano hammers a new rhythm, the *kyre'ý*.¹ With a perpetuum mobile approach, this movement displays the virtuosity of the soloist through complex and rapid rhythmic

¹ The *kyre'ý*, also refers to as the Paraguayan polca is a lively song and dance genre in compound duple meter with sesquialtera rhythmic characteristics

passages toying between various themes and the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structure of the *kyre* 'ỹ. *Mestizaje* is not only biological, but cultural as well. Illustrating spiritual and cultural transformation through rhythmic change, the composer displays musical conflict and resolution. As this metamorphosis takes place, yet another transformation is announced: the *guarania*.² Towards the end of the movement, the piano imitates the Paraguayan diatonic harp as Giménez changes the lively tempo of the *kyre* 'ỹ and introduces a triumphal *Gran Guarania*, which for him represents “the authentic sound expression of this land.” In the *Gran Guarania*, the composer emphasizes the *sincopado paraguayo*, a melodic and rhythmic effect achieved by delaying the last or by anticipating the first beat of a measure, a peculiarity of Paraguayan folk music.

In this section, the composer gives an example of what he calls “the universal projection of Paraguayan traditional music.” This idea of the projection of traditional music could be understood, at least, in two ways: first, “the universal approach” and second, the “folklore approach.” The “universal projection” approach of Giménez, referred to the employment of the symphonic form and a symphony orchestra in the performance of Paraguayan traditional music, a technique previously used by composer José Asunción Flores. Flores, who in 1925 developed the urban genre known as *guarania*, a slow and melancholy song in compound duple meter, composed and orchestrated works in the manner of symphonic poems or *guarantias sinfónicas*. Flores' academic works were performed and recorded in 1959 in Buenos Aires, and ten years later, in 1969, in Moscow by the Soviet State Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra and Choir.

In regard to the “folklore approach”... Based on folk genres and idioms, newly composed popular music in the twentieth century, was designated by local folklore specialists as *folklore de proyección*. Playing a fundamental role in the promotion of a Paraguayan identity, this newly created “folk-inspired” music did not only enrich and expand the popular music repertoire, but it also served as a means to promote interaction among the various cultural domains -- official, academic, commercial, and media domains, which have systematically promoted Paraguayan music and culture. Although this active interaction of the various domains *vis à vis* the popular discourse can be perceived as artificial or manipulative, the production and endorsement of the various local folk traditions have been well-received by the general public that by and large has disregarded the official and commercial agendas and welcomed the repertoire, the composers, and the performers that in the social imagination represent who Paraguayans are.

IV – Allegro con fuoco

The last movement, *Allegro con fuoco*, is primarily based on the *kyre* 'ỹ form. At the beginning, as the piano awaits its entrance Giménez uses percussion to aurally reinforce the new national rhythm – the *ritmo sesquiáltero*. Moving from G minor to Eb Major and then to A minor, both soloist and orchestra engage in a dense and vigorous exchange of musical themes charged with rhythmic variation.

² Developed by composer José Asunción Flores, the *guarania* is an urban instrumental and vocal genre in compound duple meter with sesquialtera rhythmic characteristics. The lyrical *guarania* exhibits a slow rhythm, long long melodic phrases, and texts charged with nostalgia and romance-like themes.

The Symphony No.1/*Concertante* for piano stands as the first work by Florentín Giménez as an established academic composer. It is a musical subjective account of the Paraguayan historical memory and testimony of his own metamorphosis and transition from a popular music performer and arranger to an academic composer and conductor. In the words of the composer,

It took me more than six years to finish this work, which required my persistence and dedication. Having in mind the works and composition techniques of Copland, Grofé, Grieg, Ravel, Smetana, Prokofiev, Albéniz, Villa-Lobos, Ginastera, and others, along with the most significant composers of all times striving to write faithfully and accurately, I wanted to testify through this and other works the same musical faithfulness. I wanted to illustrate a spiritual content [with] the highest technical quality, a symphonic perfection, and above all, to demonstrate with clarity the logic behind my musical character. And finally, through the academic content of my work, I wanted to achieve a synthesis of that [musical and personal] way of being, which would correspond to the true and authentic music of our country.” (Giménez, 147)

At this point we may ask ourselves: Why did the composer choose the subjective nationalistic approach in his first composition? Why was Paraguayan history a main concern for Giménez? Why was the issue of identity significant to him? In addition to the use of folk music idioms and the display of a personal view of the musical development of two Paraguayan traditional forms - the *guarania* and the *kyre 'ỹ* - the programmatic nature of Giménez' *Concertante* reaffirms ideas found in the socially embedded *tekó*, or the “Paraguayan way of being.” For the Paraguayan people, the action and performance of this way of being – the *tekó*, allows an individual to express and reaffirm his or her social and cultural identity, thus transcending into another realm, that of the *tekorã*, a better place of being, also understood as the culture that we will become. Florentín Giménez' musical metamorphosis reflects this intrinsic aspect of Paraguayan culture and identity. In this case, not only the use of predominant *kyre 'ỹ* musical gestures is transformed into an agent representing a Paraguayan identity, but the persistent *kyre 'ỹ* rhythm reaffirms at the conclusion of the Symphony No. 1/*Concertante* that not only a transformation of identity has taken place, but also an affirmation of that identity.

In general, the notion of Paraguayan cultural identity communicates the idea of a group of people recognizing that they belong to a specific past and present time and a geographical space. It also implies the desire of that group of people to share who they are by engaging themselves in the performance of local traditions and practices, such as speaking both Spanish and Guaraní – the country's official languages, by preserving the historical memory and the inherited Iberian-Guaraní values, and by displaying a high regard for the national territory and its natural resources. Noting that culture seems to be historically reproduced by action and sometimes altered by action (Melià 1997), I argue that Paraguayan cultural identity has not only been articulated by social action, but that has also been reinforced through the performance of popular and academic music. In the mid-twentieth century, a social and cultural dynamic was observed by Paraguayan historian Justo Prieto, according to whom Paraguayan identity has always followed a path of searching for perfection, while interacting with land, race, and society (1951). This

point also corresponds to the perception of Paraguayan sociologist Ramón Fogel, according to whom cultural identity and Paraguayan self-confidence imply the idea that people recognize and are satisfied with who they are (Añazco 1997). Fogel, however, discusses a strong counter force, which works against the self-assurance that accompanies the assertion of cultural identity. He believes that there exists in present-day Paraguay, a type of social mobilization rooted in the rejection of Paraguayan culture and that most Paraguayans, as was the case in the early twentieth century, still desire to become “civilized” by adopting foreign norms and values in order to become citizens of the new global community. To some extent, the social phenomenon of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Paraguayan culture could be indicative of the dynamic and imperative display and reaffirmation of Paraguayan identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, moving from the performance of popular music in the 1940s to the composition of academic works beginning in the 1960s, Giménez musical style has systematically incorporated Paraguayan folk music idioms throughout his concertos, symphonies, and chamber works. Although highly influenced by European and American (U.S./Latin American) nationalism, Florentín Giménez’s music reflects a distinctive Paraguayan style. In the particular case of the Symphony No. 1/*Concertante para piano en Re menor “Metamorfosis,”* not only aspects of a subjective musical nationalism have been displayed, but also concrete ideas about Paraguayan identity have been represented and reinforced: ideas and examples that include the social, musical, historical, and cultural makeup of the Paraguayan people, as well as traits of the personal metamorphosis of the composer.

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