

# ***A mi patria: A Quest for Place and Space through Baroque Counterpoint and Subjective Nationalism***

**by Alfredo Colman  
Baylor University**

Alfredo\_Colman@baylor.edu  
AMS-SW Conference, Fall 2013  
Rice University, Houston

Composed between 1970-1973, Florentín Giménez's *A mi patria* ("To My Country"), was conceived with a strong and subjective nationalistic approach. Portraying a nostalgic view of the past and the Paraguayan countryside, *A mi patria*, a collection of six preludes and fugues for piano, was inspired by diverse elements such as Baroque counterpoint, contemporary harmonies, and Paraguayan folk idioms. In this presentation, I will provide an overview of the six preludes and fugues, emphasizing Giménez's particular techniques of composition. I will also show that *A mi patria* illustrates the composer's quest for a cultural place and space where an imagined Latin American identity is represented and transmitted.

## **Biography and Works**

A determined promoter of a subjective nationalism and a firm advocate for the use of local folk music idioms in academic compositions, Florentín Giménez (b.1925) is considered the most prolific Paraguayan academic composer in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Experiencing a personal and musical metamorphosis, moving from the performance of popular music in the 1940s to the systematic study of music in the 1950s, and later to the composition of academic works in the early 1960s, Giménez's music has systematically incorporated beliefs, ideas, and musical elements displaying his Paraguayan cultural identity. Giménez's intention becomes evident in the conception and designation of his works: Seven hundred and fifty popular songs; *A mi patria* a collection of preludes and fugues for piano; *Misa folclórica paraguaya*, a Paraguayan folk mass based on traditional and popular musical genres; the three-act opera *Juana de Lara*, based on a historical figure at the time of independence (1811); six Paraguayan zarzuelas in Spanish and Guarani; two instrumental suites: *Arazy*, based on a Guarani legend, and *Mangoré* for guitar and chamber orchestra; four concertos: for piano, also known as the Symphony No.1/Concertante for piano "Metamorfosis," for violin, dedicated to the International Youth Year (1985), for viola/violoncello, dedicated to Astor Piazzolla, and for two guitars, inspired by the works of Agustín Pío Barrios "Mangoré;" three symphonic poems: *Minas kué* ("The Old Mines"), inspired by the Triple Alliance War (1865-1870), *Ciclo*, a tribute to the city of Asuncion, and *El río de la esperanza* ("The River of Hope"), a description of the Paraguay river, which divides the country into two main regions; a fantasia for symphonic band: *Fantasia étnica*; and eight symphonies: No.1 *Metamorfosis*, a depiction of the historical memory and the development of music in Paraguay, No.2 *De las estaciones* ("The [Paraguayan] Seasons") or Choral, No.3 *A la madre* ("To the Mother Figure"), No.4 *De los sortilegios* ("[Guarani] Spell"), No.5 *Del ritual* ("[Indigenous] Ritual"), No.6 *Heroica*, based on epic and heroic ideas, No. 7 *Nitsuga*, based on works by Agustín Barrios ("Nitsuga" Mangoré) with a finale for guitar and

orchestra, and No. 8 *Aldeana* (“Village”), dedicated to Latin America.

### Overview of the Work

In the midst of composing and producing Paraguayan zarzuelas for the 1970 season, Florentín Giménez decided to start working on a series of preludes and fugues for piano, his main instrument. Inspired by the Well Tempered Clavier and other works by J.S. Bach, as well as his previous and intensive counterpoint and composition training with Italian maestro Cayetano Marcolli in Buenos Aires, Giménez conceived the work as a series of vignettes or scenes in the life of the Paraguayan farmer and the Paraguayan countryside. Thus, the six preludes and fugues are depictions of a 24-hour period in the countryside: the early morning, the dawn, a school recess, the siesta, the sunset, and a time of meditation at night.

No. 1 in Bb major, *La madrugada* (“Early Morning”)

No. 2 in G major, *El amanecer* (“Dawn”)

No. 3 in G major, *El recreo escolar* (“School Recess”)

No. 4 in F major, *La siesta* (“Siesta”)

No. 5 in D major, *El ocaso* (“Sunset”)

No. 6 in Ab major/F minor, *Noche, esperanza...luna* (“Night, Hope...Moon”)

Although he approached the preludes with more freedom and the fugues with a strict 18<sup>th</sup> century counterpoint technique, Giménez systematically employed 20<sup>th</sup> century harmonies, sharp dissonances, and compound duple meter in all the pieces, except for the first prelude. Discussing this work, Argentine music critic and journalist Arturo Frutcher indicates that,

this [musical] immersion is a meticulous exploration of the Prelude and Fugue genre, ..., and consequently [one] of great interest [to Giménez], [who is cultivating] a deeper knowledge [of music], not only because of his treatment of the piano, but also because of his desire to evaluate his [own] evolution [as a composer] within the universal [world] of [classical] music.<sup>1</sup>

While **Prelude No. 1 in Bb major** integrates a highly sentimental melody with superimposed triads and hints at the *guarania* rhythm – a popular musical genre with lyrical melodies, tonal harmonies, and slow rhythm in compound duple meter, the four-voice **Fugue** uses rhythmic cells based on the Paraguayan *polca* or *pupyasy* – an energetic traditional song and dance genre in compound duple meter. [play example] Following a similar approach, **Prelude No. 2** adds a more emphatic use of parallel thirds and sixths as well as the vibrant and playful *kyre’y*, a subgenre of the Paraguayan *polca*. The subject of **Fugue No. 2** is based on a theme coming from Giménez’s Concertante for piano “Metamorfosis.” In this particular segment of the Concertante, the composer makes allusion to the excitement of a man who sings a new song in the midst of an unknown future, just as the farmer in Fugue No. 2 is excited to embrace a new day of labor.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Prefacio* to the musical score (p. 2). This view is also affirmed by Giménez in his autobiography (2008).

**In Prelude No. 3 in G major**, Giménez employs a well-known children’s round, *Sale el sol* (“The Sun Is Out”), which is presented above a motoric variation on the Paraguayan *polca* rhythm. The following four-part fugue also shows a playful character, where short melodic phrases are emphasized in a duple, at times quadruple, meter feel while maintaining the writing in compound duple meter. [play example] **Prelude and Fugue No. 4 in F major** illustrate the composer’s attempt to combine the bucolic and relaxed environment of a Paraguayan siesta with the melancholy sound and expressive sentiment associated with the Negro Spiritual and the blues. To achieve this effect, Giménez employs melodic and rhythmic cells inspired by the first of George Gershwin’s *Preludes for Piano* along with a complex musical deconstruction of the Paraguayan *guarania*. [play example]

Evoking the typical harmonic progression found in lyrical *guaranias*, the **Prelude No. 5 in D major** introduces repeated ascending and descending melodic lines, which at first seem disjoint, but quickly create an atmosphere of emotional expressivity, which leads into the two-voice accompanying **Fugue**. The **Fugue** evokes segments of the Prelude and employs constant parallel thirds and sixths, imitating the approach to improvised harmonization found in traditional vocal music. The final **Prelude, No. 6 in Ab major**, imitates the strumming pattern of the guitar or the Paraguayan harp while accompanying *guaranias* and *purahéi asy* – a 19<sup>th</sup> century melancholy song genre developed in the countryside. Contrasting the typical sound and tonal area of the *guarania* – which is usually in a minor key, Giménez uses Ab major and the full extension of the piano to create an enigmatic atmosphere. The final four-voice **Fugue No. 6 in F minor**, offers a musical synthesis of the Paraguayan *polca*, the *kyre’y*, the *guarania*, and the *purahéi asy* through the introduction and restatement of harmonic formulas and rhythmic cells coming from these traditional and popular genres. Nevertheless, in this particular fugue, Giménez’s counterpoint and sound appear to be more traditional in the writing. [play example]

In 2002, pianist Pierre Jancovic premiered the set of preludes and fugues in Asuncion. Four years earlier, in 1998, the composer had published the work as his contribution to the rare Paraguayan piano literature. However, this was not his first publication for the piano. Previously, in 1995, he had published “Microsones,” a collection of 62 piano pieces (including canons, chorales, fugues, and dance suite movements) as well as a 3-movement sonata. Oddly enough, a few pianists and students at the National Conservatory have only known Giménez’s piano works.

Since his first academic work, the 1960-1969 Concertante for piano “Metamorfosis,” later expanded as the Symphony No. 1 “Metamorfosis,” the composer has become an advocate for the promotion of Paraguayan academic music. Seeking to promote a Paraguayan sound informed by folk idioms, his compositions represent works within the designation “the universal projection of Paraguayan music.” A few Paraguayan 20<sup>th</sup> century composers (Remberto Giménez, Juan Max Boettner, José Asunción Flores, Florentín Giménez, Luis Szarán) have used this phrase in reference to musical works inspired by Paraguayan traditional music employing Western European academic or classical music models such as the concerto, the symphony, and chamber music forms.

## QUEST FOR CULTURAL PLACE/SPACE

Not only Florentín Giménez's *A mi patria* exemplifies a composer's technique in the composition of preludes and fugues for piano combining traditional counterpoint techniques with 20<sup>th</sup> century harmonies or even a programmatic and subjective nationalistic approach, but the work also serves as a kaleidoscope where aspects of a Paraguayan and Latin American identity could be observed and transmitted. I use the kaleidoscope as a metaphor to signify the multiple ways in which we could appreciate and value a shared common yet distinctive Latin American cultural and social identity. *A mi patria* suggests a specific geographical place (The Paraguayan countryside) and a cultural space (the cosmovision and surroundings of the Paraguayan farmer) where experiences and emotions are lived and shared daily. Nevertheless, the vignettes or scenes in the life of the Paraguayan farmer are in reality, Pan-American. In fact, from Argentina and Chile in the South, to Mexico in the North and even beyond, Latin Americans could relate to such character (the farmer) and the programmatic story line (the twenty four hour-period in the countryside). At a first view, the kaleidoscope metaphor allows us to appreciate the different shades of the ubiquitous compound duple meter with sesquialtera rhythmic characteristics, as well as the common celebratory or melancholy sound of traditional genres, common throughout Latin America. At a second view and applying Arjun Appadurai's concept of "ethnoscapes," the kaleidoscope metaphor could be used to observe place and space as landscapes of group identities, (1988). In fact, cutting across conventional political and social boundaries (Appadurai 1996), Giménez's *A mi patria* suggests a type of musical and cultural Pan-Americanization, at least, from the conceptual point of the work. I am not indicating that Giménez's work exemplifies Appadurai's theories or vice-versa, but I suggest a parallel between the composer's view of Latin American common traditions and cultural identities while the images of the farmer's life in the Paraguayan countryside are observed through the kaleidoscope. Influenced by the European 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism and the programmatic works of figures such as Carlos Chávez, Aaron Copland, Manuel de Falla, Alberto Ginastera, and Heitor Villa-Lobos, Florentín Giménez believes that music composed employing a subjective nationalistic approach may cause an awareness of cultural pride, evoking patriotic sentiments among those individuals connected – socially or culturally – to the programmatic nature of such works. During a 2012 personal interview with the composer, Giménez shared with me that beyond the composition and promotion of academic music with a "Paraguayan" element, he desired to convey through his works a Latin American voice celebrating a common cultural identity. Indeed, besides *A mi patria*, this has also been the case for his *Fantasia étnica* for symphonic band written in 1990, and his Symphonies No. 5 ("Del Ritual") in 1992, and No. 8 ("Aldeana") in 2004. In addition to the programmatic nature of Giménez' *A mi patria* and his reading of selected Paraguayan traditional forms - the *guarania*, the *purahéi asy*, the Paraguayan *polca*, and the *kyre'y* –, another turn and view in the kaleidoscope could reveal shades of beliefs found in the socially imagined *tekó*, or the "Paraguayan way of being." Extracted from the pre-Colonial Guarani cosmovision, the action of being, or, the performance of this particular way of being (the *tekó*) induces an individual to express and reaffirm his or her identity through action (what action? "the action of being"). Not only Giménez's

music systematically reflects that intrinsic aspect of the Paraguayan *tekó*, but also his compositions seem to prescribe what that “way of being” should be.

As we have observed, Florentín Giménez’s *A mi patria*, combines the composer’s application of Baroque forms and counterpoint techniques with 20<sup>th</sup> century harmonies within a programmatic and subjective nationalistic context. In conclusion, portraying a nostalgic view of the past and the Paraguayan countryside, as well as the imbedded ideal of “being Paraguayan,” *A mi patria* is also a subjective quest for a common place and space where an imagined Pan-American cultural identity is displayed and transmitted.

### References

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Giménez, Florentín. *Historia sin tiempo*. Asunción: Editorial Salemma, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A mi patria. Séis preludios y fugas para piano, Obs. 64 a 69*. [Asunción, 1998]

\_\_\_\_\_. *Microsones, Pequeñas piezas selectas para piano*. Asunción: 1995.

Meliá, Bartomeu. *El Paraguay inventado*. Asunción: Centro de Estudios Paraguayos “Antonio Guasch,” 1997.