

ALBERTO GINASTERA

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This article is more personal than most. We all have a right to express our feelings strongly.

I am not enamoured with Latin-American music. To begin with the term Latin-America is a misnomer. Central and all of South America is called Latin-America yet it has nothing to do with the Latin language or culture. In all these countries many different languages are used.

Ginastera was born in Buenos Aires on 11 April 1916. The language of Argentina is Portuguese. It is a country that indulges in the Argentina tango which is a stupid dance and suggestive. Even admirers of this dance admit this. Neither do I like flamenco dancing with irritating castanets and clattering shoes. There are many Hollywood musicals where you have superb orchestrations of gorgeous music ruined by the intrusive tap dancing of someone like Gene Kelly complete with his Cheshire cat grin. The music is ruined. Someone has rightly said that tap dancers should do it in bare feet!



As a child he played 'music' on the kitchen utensils at home and was spanked for it. At the age of seven his parents realised their son's interest in music and financed piano lessons for him.

The moans and complaints over, but they are significant is that I have found in Ginastera a composer of immense skill and technique, one who understands rhythm and uses it to great advantage. I have no doubt that he is the finest Latin-American composer.

He married the pianist Mercedes de Toro and they had two children in the 1940s,

I cringe when so-called music lovers and self-appointed experts refer to the piano as a string instrument. It is not. It is a percussion instrument and so when ignoramuses complain about Bartok's piano music being percussive they are out of order because the piano is a percussive instrument. Listen to the finale of Ginastera's Piano Concerto of 1961 and admire the percussive and dynamic rhythms which are enthralling.

He is the composer of the finest and most amazing Harp Concerto of all time and the harp is not an easy instrument to write for because of its limitations. This concerto is his opus 25. It is a very beautiful work, incredibly dynamic, adorable, original, tonal although the harp is limited; the glissandi are staggering, the melodies unforgettable. The form is clearly sonata form and coherent and at, about 3.30 the harpist plays a rhythmic feature on the surrounding wood of the instrument. It is the finest harp concerto ever written. The movement begins in an eerie fashion and there is a cadenza of amazing virtuosity. The performance on You Tube by Chaerin Kim must be seen.

Ginastera was unashamedly nationalistic. He wrote music based on the gauchos, the horse riders of the Argentina plains. It is said that his music falls into three distinct periods namely Objective Nationalism (1934-1948), Subjective nationalism (1948-1956) and, finally, Neo-Expressionism (1958-1983), whatever these definitions mean.

His ballet Estancia is very appealing and another nationalistic work. Malambo Op 7 was given a crude

performance at a Prom with Gustavo Duhamel and the Simon Bolivar Orchestra in which this colourful work was made fun of. His ballet Panambi is his Opus 1 and dates from 1937.

What is also amazing about this composer is that his music is vital and brings the countryside of Argentine alive. One can sense the heat, the rolling plains and the excitement of fast moving horses. It is exhilarating open air music.

Alberto Evaristo Ginastera graduated from the Buenos Aires Conservatory in 1938 and then taught at the Liceo Militar General San Marin. Among his pupils was Astor Piazzolla and this was from about 1941. He lived from 1921 to 1992 and wrote a lot of film music and endless tangos. His music is superficial and somewhat banal; it is commonplace, predictable and tedious just like Strauss waltzes.

From 1945 to 1947 Ginastera was in the USA on a Guggenheim Fellowship and studied with Aaron Copland in Tanglewood yet there is no influence of Copland's music in the works of Ginastera. His return to Argentina afforded him more teaching posts and he was a co-founder of the League of Composers. He founded the Conservatory of Music and Drama in Buenos Aires and his String Quartet no 1 earned him many admirers. He had to resign from his post as he had made his anti-military position too clear

He moved back to the USA in 1968 and, in 1970, settled in Europe.

As an example of the originality of his work, there is the Cantata para America magic of 1960 scored for a dramatic soprano and 53 percussion instruments premiered in Los Angeles. When I mentioned this to a British writer on music, noted for his books on Elgar, Richard Strauss and Mahler, he turned his nose up in disgust. Such is the ignorance of some people.

Ginastera composed three operas namely Don Rodrigo Op 31 of 1964, which was a remarkable success, Bomarzo Op 34 and Beatrix Cenci Op 38 of 1971.

Bomarzo was banned in Argentina. It is in two acts to a libretto by the Spanish author Manuel Mujica Lainez from his novel about a 16th century Italian Pier Francesco Orsini. It was banned in Argentina because of its sexual content and was premiered in Washington on 19 May 1967 and the following year given in New York

One of Ginastera's earliest works was a setting for chorus and orchestra of Psalm 150 Op 5 of 1938. It is truly magnificent and some of the orchestration is unbelievably good.

His Piano Sonata no 1 Op 22 is a fine example of exceptional piano writing. The performance by Terence Judd is highly commended. It was a tragedy when he took his own life in 1979 having suffered a nervous breakdown and depression. There followed two other piano sonatas.

Ginastera's Piano Concerto Op 28 of 1961 is generally a well-written, fluent, rhythmic and vital work. Sadly, the first movement, marked cadenza and variations, suffers from stops and starts and may not hang together in a completely satisfactory way but the robust music has a great appeal. The final pages of this movement has a terrific coda. There follows a scherzo and then the slow movement, adagissimo, seems to evoke night life as Bartok did, but it builds up to an impressive essay. The finale, a toccata Concertante, is an amazing success.

There is a Piano Concerto no 2 which commences with 32 variations on a theme of Beethoven. With the exception of Rachmaninov's splendid Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini I am not sure that variations always work in a concert piece for piano and orchestra.

The amazing piano writing is also shown in such works as the incredible Cello Sonata op 49. This is

a masterful work brilliantly composed for both instruments and is powerful. Arresting, often sumptuous in its beauty and certainly enthralling. It is so good that it must be a winning contender for the finest cello sonata of all time.

The String Quartets have a ruggedness that lifts them out of the common place. The Quartet no 2 Op 26 lasts for 25 minutes and is in five sections, the outer movements are fascinating in rhythmic content. The Quartet no 3 Op 40 is really a contemplative work with a soprano performing texts by Jimenez, Lorca and Alberti. But it is not a string quartet.

His personal life began to disintegrate in the late 1960s. He separated from his wife and they were divorced in 1969. In 1971 he married the renowned cellist Aurora Natola and they set up home in Geneva.

This Latin American composer died of pancreatic cancer in Geneva on 25 June 1983. He was 67.

Aurora died after surgery for cancer in 2009 at the age of 85.

THE WORKS OF GINESTERA

Opera

- Don Rodrigo, Op. 31 (1963–64)
- Bomarzo, Op. 34 (1966–67), banned in Argentina until 1972
- Beatrix Cenci, Op. 38 (1971), based on the play The Cenci (1819) by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Ballet

- Panambí, Op. 1 (1934–1937)
- Estancia, Op. 8 (1941)

Orchestral

- Obertura para el “Fausto” criollo, Op. 9 (1943)
- Ollantay: 3 Symphonic Movements, Op. 17 (1947)
- Variaciones concertantes, Op. 23 (1953)
- Pampeana No. 3, Op. 24 (1954)
- Concerto per corde, Op. 33 (1965)
- Estudios Sinfonicos, Op. 35 (1967)
- Popol Vuh, Op. 44 (1975–1983, left incomplete at the composer’s death)
- Glosses sobre temas de Pau Casals, Op. 46 (1976)
- Glosses sobre temas de Pau Casals, Op. 48 (1976–77)
- Iubilum, Op. 51 (1979–80)

Concertante

- Harp
- Harp Concerto, Op. 25 (1956–65)
- Piano
- Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 28 (1961)
- Cadenza e varianti
- Scherzo allucinante
- Adagissimo
- Toccata concertata
- Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 39 (1972)
- 32 variazioni sopra un accordo di Beethoven
- Scherzo per la mano sinistra
- Quasi una fantasia

Cadenza
Finale prestissimo
Violin
Violin Concerto, Op. 30 (1963)
Cello
Cello Concerto No. 1, Op. 36 (1968)
Cello Concerto No. 2, Op. 50 (1980–81)

Piano

Danzas argentinas, Op. 2 (1937)
Tres piezas, Op. 6 (1940)
Malambo, Op. 7 (1940)
Pequena Danza (from the ballet Estancia, Op. 8) (1941)
12 Preludios americanos, Op. 12 (1944)
Suite de danzas criollas, Op. 15 (1946, rev. 1956)
Rondó sobre temas infantiles argentinos, Op. 19 (1947)
Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22 (1952)
Arrangement of an Organ Toccata by Domenico Zipoli (1970)
Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 53 (1981)
Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 54 (1982)
Danzas argentinas Para los niños (Unfinished)
Moderato: para Alex
Paisaje: para Georgina

Organ

Toccata, Villancico y Fuga, Op. 18 (1947)
Variazioni e Toccata sopra Aurora lucis rutilat, Op. 52 (1980)
Variación 1: Maestoso
Variación 2: Tempo giusto
Variación 3: Impetuoso, l'istesso tempo
Variación 4: Vivacissimo
Variación 5: L'istesso tempo
Variación 6: L'istesso tempo
Variación 7: Sereno
Variación 8: Estatico
Variación 9: Quasi allegretto
Variación 10: Pastorale
Variación 11: Andantino poetico
Variación 12: Lento
Toccata - Finale: Tema

Vocal/Choral

2 canciones, for voice and piano, Op. 3 (1938)
Cantos del Tucumán, for voice, flute, harp, percussion, and violin, Op. 4 (1938)
Psalm 150, for chorus, Op. 5 (1938)
5 canciones populares argentinas, for voice and piano, Op. 10 (1943)
Las horas de una estancia, for voice and piano, Op. 11 (1943)
Hieremiae prophetae lamentationes, for chorus, Op. 14 (1946)
Cantata para América mágica, for dramatic soprano and percussion orchestra,
Op. 27 (1960)
Cantata Bomarzo, for soloists, narrator, and chamber orchestra, Op. 32 (1964)
Milena, for soprano and orchestra, Op. 37 (1971)
Serenata, for baritone, violoncello, wind quintet, percussion, harp, and double bass, Op. 42 (1973)

Turbæ ad passionem gregorianam, for soloists, chorus, boy's chorus and orchestra, Op. 43 (1975)
Canción del beso robado, for voice and piano (19??)

Chamber/Solo Instrumental

Duo, for flute and oboe, Op. 13 (1945)
Pampeana No. 1, for violin and piano, Op. 16 (1947)
String Quartet No. 1, Op. 20 (1948)
Pampeana No. 2, for violoncello and piano, Op. 21 (1950)
String Quartet No. 2, Op. 26 (1958, Rev. 1968)
Piano Quintet, Op. 29 (1963)
String Quartet No. 3, for soprano and string quartet, Op. 40 (1973)
Puneña no.1, for flute, Op. 41 (1973, left incomplete at the time of the composer's (death)
Puneña no.2 ("Hommage à Paul Sacher"), for violoncello, Op. 45 (1976)
Sonata, for guitar, Op. 47 (1976, Rev. 1981)
Sonata, for violoncello and piano, Op. 49 (1979)

Works withdrawn by the composer (without opus number)

Piezas Infantiles, for piano (1934)
Impresiones de la Puna, for flute and string quartet (1934)
Concierto argentino, for piano and orchestra (1936)
El arriero canta, for chorus (1937)
Sonatina, for harp (1938)
Symphony No. 1 ("Porteña") (1942)
Symphony No. 2 ("Elegíaca") (1944)

Incidental/Film Music

Don Basilio malcasado (1940)
Doña Clorinda la descontenta (1941)
Malambo (1942)
Rosa de América (1945)
Las antiguas semillas (1947)
Nace la libertad (1949)
El puente (1950)
Facundo, el tigre de los llanos (1952)
Caballito criollo (1953)
Su seguro servidor (1954)
Los maridos de mamá (1956)
Enigma de mujer (1956)
Primavera de la vida (1958)
Hay que bañar al nene (1958)
El límite (1958)
A María del corazón (1960)
La doncella prodigiosa (1961)

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