

The Case of Emilio Blas Atehortúa and the Potential for Universal Music

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Dear Friends of the Latin American Music Center:

As we approach the end of this year, we bring you one last article from our visiting scholar, Dr. Giampiero Bugliarello. His research this month focuses on the controversial figure of Emilio Blas Atehortúa, a twentieth-century avant-garde composer from Colombia. I hope that you enjoy this article, and we look forward to publishing more research on the composers in our collection in 2022!

We at the Latin American Music Center wish you and your family a happy and healthy Christmas and New Year!

Best regards,
Gustavo Ahualli
Director of The Latin American Music Center

The Case of Emilio Blas Atehortúa and the Potential for Universal Music

Dr. Giampiero Bugliarello

Introduction

Albeit not abundant, the literature about Emilio Blas Atehortúa confronts us with a musical giant: the father of Colombian Art Music,¹ the founder and most important composer of Colombian academic music,² and one of the most outstanding international composers of his time.³ As controversial as is the composer himself, so too is the literature about him: within a preliminary source survey, the first thing that stands out is how the written history of Atehortúa's life features many parallel lives: the real one starting in 1933,⁴ and other fictitious ones - which surprisingly characterize the vast majority of the sources - that usually choose the year 1943. Amusingly, this confusion finds its roots in the composer himself, who used to declare himself younger by shifting his date of birth up to twelve years later.⁵

Furthermore, the documentation of the number of his compositions has oscillated between 190⁶ and 300.⁷ To this day it remains a dilemma without a practical solution since, whatever the number may be, only a small portion of it has been published.⁸



(Emilio Blas Atehortúa: b: Santa Helena, 1933; d: Bucaramanga, 2020)

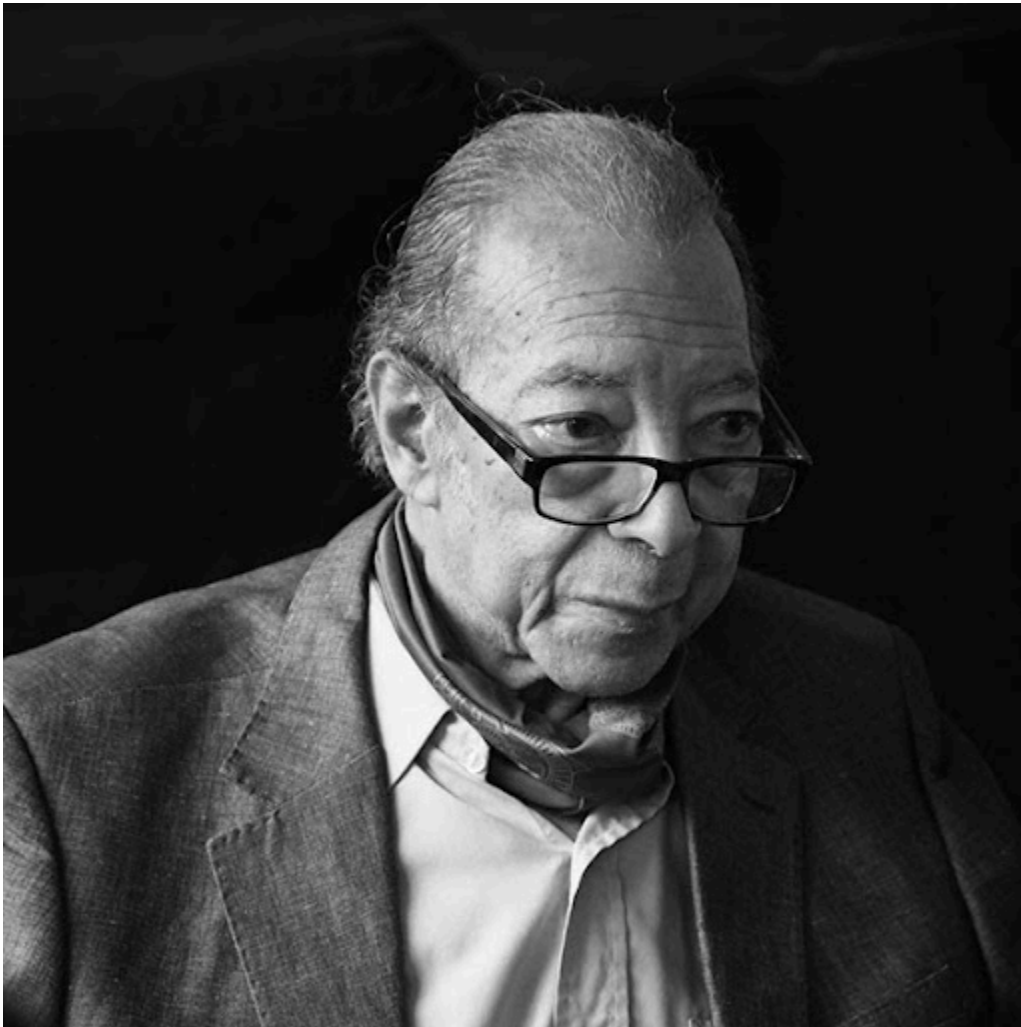
This is already enough for the intellectually honest reader to deduce how, in this story, it often becomes impossible to draw a line separating truth from fiction. To further cloud our minds, are the multitude of possible conclusions that analysis of his universal music language can lead to; and the narration of his character that tends to be colored by a spectacularization of the events of his life (which reaches its climax in the article “Alusión a lo Possible”). For these reasons, his story becomes even more deserving of being preserved in all its most fantastic facets, and when possible, approaching the facts *cum grano salis*.

Like many avant-garde musicians, he as well is a symbol of the battle between conservatories and avant-garde composers, by which art turns into the bone of contention between the new intellectual élite and the conservative government authorities.⁹ Musical creation becomes the conveyor of a political and social view, as he learned from his contemporaries (particularly from Luigi Nono).¹⁰ For his part, Atehortúa mainly spread the word through his own vast and variegated musical output, and by teaching it to his students “not because [these compositions were] the best, but because these [were] the ones that [he knew] better.”¹¹

Scholars generally convey the image of an authentic musical “Renaissance Man,” whose musical qualities are drawn from a wide range of styles - from the Venetian School to the Second Viennese School.¹² His activities thus span from sophisticated imitations of old styles, as in the case of *Divertimento a la Manera de Mozart*;¹³ through experiments on old styles, as in the case of *Soggetto da Vivaldi* Op. 71;¹⁴ until the more emblematic and eclectic kind of writing. Of these last ones he

blends elements of tonal, modal, and serial techniques, and realizes them through contrapuntal, homophonic, and heterophonic textures, or still, through aleatoric writing.¹⁵ These characteristics finally brought him to be identified with a conservative modernism.¹⁶

The composer himself was aware and proud of the manifold range of compositional tools he had at his disposal, as he said: “I am a real man who knows the techniques and who knows many abilities, a sort of talent which allows me to do my job in the best possible way.”¹⁷ Speaking of which, it is important to distinguish a musical product conceived with an artistic purpose from one derived from merely a compositional technique, as he also said: “if I write in the style of Mozart, because I can do it, I do it with my hands, not with my mind, because that is just technique and not art.”¹⁸



Certainly, in Atehortúa, the history of music presents us with a more unique than rare case under both human and artistic perspectives; so that it would be superficial to find the reasons for such an extravagant musical production by solely adhering to the current of musicological thought in vogue.

After all, Atehortúa went through a turbulent childhood, where three different people played the mother's role; had an uncommon musical training; and, because of his sparkling temperament, generally led an uphill life. Since childhood, he was known for his bizarre, eclectic, provocative, and grumpy nature. This extravagance, however, has often been given a negative connotation: as a young man, among his acquaintances, it was a common belief that something regrettable would happen to him because of his idiocy.¹⁹ But nobody could predict that oddity, instead, would have found its outburst within the world of art, leading him to a promising career, featured by an endless list of awards. For example, he was awarded an honorary degree in music from the National University of Columbia in 1991;²⁰ received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Organization of American States, the Office of Iberian American Education, Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation;²¹ and held academic appointments in Tunja, Popayayán, Medellín, Ibagué, and Bogotá (where he served as conservatory director).²² His success finally attributes to this story an important moral concerning the positive consequence in which perseverance and stubbornness may eventually result.²³



Childhood and Education

Blas Emilio Atehortúa origins were in the Sephardic community, being born to Isaac David Tetuán, a hispanic-jewish-arab textile merchant, and Miriam David a jewish-catalan biologist. Legend has it that on an autumn night in Santa Elena, around the seventh month of pregnancy and despite the unfavorable weather conditions, Miriam (for professional reasons) decided to pick some flowers before dawn. But while challenging Mother Nature, she instead found herself delivering her baby in the middle of the forest. The poor health conditions to which she was subject meant that she was rushed to the nearest hospital in the city, while the infant Blas, barely breathing and inside a violet and moribund little body, was literally abandoned to the clutches of the gripping cold and the thick fog. According to the doctor who rescued her, in the event that the child survived, he would have no brain function, since it did not receive the proper oxygen supply.²⁴ But hanging on for life, as if by a miracle, he survived (despite the elements and hunger) until Ramón Atehortúa and Gabriela Amaya eventually found him;²⁵ not without provoking the anger of the doctor who accused them of

responsibility for the child's plight. A more rare but realistic version of Atehortúa's life can be found in how Miriam was actually a relative of Gabriela, and the baby was purposely left in her care.²⁶

Legend also has it that around the age of seven, thanks to a radio program meant to reunite displaced persons, the little Blas became aware of his true biological mother. However, they precisely refer to "Investiga a Madlin," a program intended to reunite families after the Second World War (which was only just beginning at this time). Although the circumstances of his reconnection with his biological mother is another grey area in his background, there is no doubt that he did not abandon his adoptive parents. At the same time, he found in Miriam a good economic support, indispensable for undertaking his musical path.

His adoptive family bore no musical knowledge, but as a child he was inclined to identify the recordings they kept at their house. However, what interested him most was looking at the spinning disk, which he could reach by climbing the furniture. He was introduced to music at the age of eight when taking piano lessons from the Venezuelan pianist Ruth Muñoz, although he soon realized that this instrument fell outside his interests. At the age of eleven, after listening to the "Symphonia Spagnola" by Edward Lalo, his wish to learn violin was satisfied through lessons from Buhuslav Harvanek, who supported the little child in his desire to correct existing music. But at the same time Harvanek attempted to inculcate the importance of having a clear idea of harmonic coherence, and to respect the proportion and correspondence of chords; and therefore, he offered to pass on that knowledge through free lessons.

As a child, Atehortúa used to secretly hang out in a cave, which he converted ad hoc for keeping his trumpets, marbles, and balloons. There are also references to a little pond that he made by himself with stones, where he used to get wet. It is there that he went to hide, when his family took the unwelcome initiative to move to Medellín. But Nutria, the only friend who was aware of his hiding places, betrayed and ratted him out to his parents, so he was taken away and brought to the new city.

Medellín is where his formal music education took place. At the age of thirteen, he studied violin at the Institute of Fine Arts, although it remains unclear if he became timpanist or violinist at the Banda Departamental de Antioquia.²⁷ His studies proceeded at the Conservatorio de la Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, where at the age of twenty-six he undertook the study of orchestra conducting

and composition. It is here that he would have established a relationship with his third mother - known as mamá Conchita - who welcomed him to her place, indeed, as if he were her own son.²⁸

At the age of thirty-three he was awarded a scholarship to join the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM) at the institute Torcuato di Tella, one of the leading Latin American institutions that focused on contemporary music and its avant-garde techniques. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that such a personality could have been seen benevolently within such an institution: it was here that he could finally take a sigh of relief from the academic obstructionism to which he was often subjected, and where he could find that kind of open-mindedness necessary to understand and appreciate his way of conceiving the art of sounds.

The Potential of Universalism

A disinterest toward harmonic laws as a child, plus the impossibility of immersing oneself in polyphonic textures on the violin, at first glance, would not seem to level the ground for a composer. However, these circumstances were such as to prevent him from falling into that trap sometimes identified as "the tonal cage," and for not molding him into just any composer, as Joseph Matza predicted. Not by chance are Bartok and Ginastera Atehortúa's greatest influences, which can be heard in his chromaticism and rhythmic complexity.²⁹ In 1983, his similarity with the former aroused the enthusiasm of the Hungarian Cultural and Governmental Organization, who assigned to him a commemorative medal for the centenary of the composer's birth. The influence of Ginastera, instead, extends to a personal level: under his guidance, indeed, Atehortúa became his faithful disciple and close friend, and the years of their association mark a period of profound artistic maturation and bedding of his aesthetic vision. Here the new elite aimed to look at the art of sound through the new filters of the "universal aesthetic," which actually expands beyond the music world. The conceptions of beauty, function, and the universals in the aesthetic valuation of auditive or visual percepts, get drastically rethought.³⁰ In this way, as stated by Peter Lamarque in "The Aesthetic and the Universal," "a painting conceived as a work of art is not just pigment on canvas or a retinal image or a depiction with representational properties, nor is a literary work constituted merely by the semantic or rhetorical features of its sentences or indeed by the moral content of its themes, and (likewise) a musical work is not just a set of pleasing sounds."³¹



At a time when Colombia was searching for its national musical voice, it is possible to imagine frictions springing from pretending to attribute to a ‘universal language’ the functions of an ‘identitarian’ one. This is why two contrary and opposite visions on the role of his music were manifested: on one side, there was an anxious press that aimed to recognize the nationalistic imprint at all costs;³² and on the other side, there was an audience that totally rejected the idea he could have contributed to the production of Colombian music. This precisely occurred when he returned home after the CLAEM experience, when attempting to introduce avant-garde music to his country.³³

However, a problem remains since it is not possible to absolutize how bold or subtle the Colombian musical content should be, in order to be identified as a nationalistic product. That would be, for example, the case of the veiled Bambuco, the national dance of Colombia,³⁴ which characterizes the second movement of *Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152*,³⁵ or in the case of Cristoforo Colombo Op. 167, a symphonic poem with choir, where the national idiom would emerge more from the language than from the music.

However, the composer expressed a clear position concerning the matter, giving a response concerning at least his intentions, to both the anxious press and to those who accused his music of not being a conveyor of the nationalistic idiom: “I write with a universalist vision. If there is some folklore in my music, I have not searched for it. It has come out only of a universalist intention. But I feel proud when the authentically Latin American flows from me naturally. I don’t try to hide it.”³⁶

The various conclusions to which analysis of universal musical language might lead gives to musicologists a way to propose varied hypotheses, opening new horizons for the future research of Atehortúa's music.

Canto Lirico, the third movement of Op. 152, is conceived on the juxtaposition of tonal and atonal elements, on the duality of metered and unmetered sections, and on the technique of “controlled spontaneity.” This term was coined by the composer himself, who mandated that the conductor look for non-togetherness among orchestra players, so that the lack of rhythmic alignment might enrich the section.³⁷ If on one side, then, it seems to reflect the avant-garde *modus operandi*, at the same time, it is a common thought among scholars - as in the case of Glenn Garrido³⁸ - that it would manifest a deep sense of Romanticism. But, for now, it is impossible to know in what way it would occur.

This is also the case of *Gaudeamus para dos sopranos, coro de niños, coro de cámara mixto, gran coro mixto y orquesta* Op. 180, where a simple reference to the “romantic character” of themes should be accepted as a sufficient reason for making this music evocative of Liszt and Mahler.³⁹

Conclusions

Therefore, we spontaneously wonder if that same ‘anything-valid research methodology’ through which his life has been viewed, could have been extended, at times, to the interpretation of his musical output as well. If so, would the universal musical language contribute in making it easier to extrapolate information, making it at times a good pretext to accept more hazardous claims? Or if not, has the universal language been proven as an effective type of writing that potentially contains all the musical knowledge of the past?

Regardless, some scholars continue to promote myths surrounding this composer: the fact that we read that as a child, the little Blas was unconsciously re-writing Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, or the fact that even the most recent sources persist in supporting the fictitious dates, leads us to believe that there are musicologists who support avant-garde composers and their histories without directing a genuine gaze at the verifiable events.

I would argue, therefore, that the history of music might already provide an explanation for the aptitude of these myth-promoting scholars. They might actually be the evidence that after almost fifty years from the disappearance of the CLAEM, their coveted and so-called “network of solidarity” (where composers are encouraged to support other avant-garde fellows)⁴⁰ - is still perfectly

functioning, and it has been extended from the strict circle of composers, successfully to the field of musicology.

Footnotes:

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4. *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Atehortúa (Amaya), Blas Emilio." accessed December 10 2021,
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5. Luis Eduardo Herrera, "The Claem and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latinamericanism and Avant-garde Music" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), 125.
6. *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Atehortúa (Amaya), Blas Emilio."
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9. Ricardo Dal Farra, "Some Comments about Electroacoustic Music and Life in Latin America," *Leonardo Music Journal*, No. 4 (1994): 93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1513187>.
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11. Gómez, "Critical Edition and Interpretative Analysis of Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152 by Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 4-5.
12. Friedmann, "El siglo veinte y la música contemporánea. La proyección de la música colombiana: Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 68.
13. Blas Emilio Atehortúa, *La música de cámara de Blas Emilio Atehortúa*, August 14, 2015, YouTube video, 28:55,
<https://youtu.be/KwiHen2MAbc?t=1732>.
14. Blas Emilio Atehortúa, *La música sinfónica de Blas Emilio Atehortúa*, August 12, 2015, YouTube video, 54:20,
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15. Gómez, "Critical Edition and Interpretative Analysis of Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152 by Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 7.
16. Herrera, "The Claem and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds": 293.
17. Valbuena, "Alusión a lo posible": 15.
18. *Ibid.*, 13.
19. *Ibid.*, 2.
20. Gómez, "Critical Edition and Interpretative Analysis of Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152 by Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 4.
21. Glenn Garrido, "An Analysis of Atehortúa Music for Winds and Percussion, Opus. 152," *WASBE Journal*, No. 11 (2004): 15.
22. *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "Atehortúa (Amaya), Blas Emilio."
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- Pamela Bowen Chester, "A Study of the Life and Wind Music of Blas Emilio Atehortúa, including a Critical Edition and Stylistic Analysis of Cinco Piezas a Béla Bartók" (D.M.A. diss., University of Northern Colorado, 1997), 9-10.
26. Valbuena, "Blas Emilio Atehortúa: Alusión a lo posible": 2.
27. Gómez, "Critical Edition and Interpretative Analysis of Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152 by Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 1.
28. Valbuena, "Blas Emilio Atehortúa: Alusión a lo posible": 2-7.
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36. Herrera, "The Claem and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds": 206.
37. Gómez: "Critical Edition and Interpretative Analysis of Música para Orquesta de Vientos y Percusión Op. 152 by Blas Emilio Atehortúa": 24-25.
38. Glenn Rafael Garrido, "Conducting, Teaching, and Interpreting Three Selected Contemporary Wind Band Works by Latin American Composers" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2000), 93.
39. Friedmann, "El siglo veinte y la música contemporánea. La proyección de la música colombiana: Bias Emilio Atehortúa": 68
40. Herrera, "The Claem and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds": 186-227.

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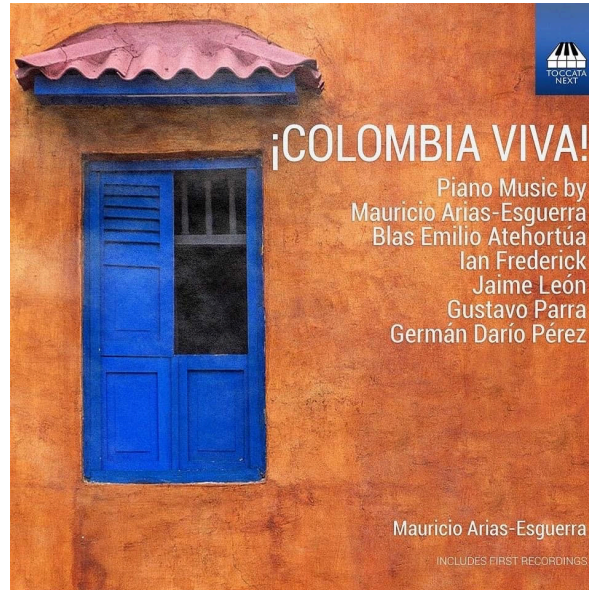
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