

Teaching through Composition: The Choral Music of alcides lanza

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Abstract

This presentation will demonstrate how lanza¹ teaches his students through composition. Information gathered from lanza's former students, will show how his compositions taught and inspired them. By teaching his students to be individual, independent, artistic, creative, and playful he inspired many generation of Canadian composers.

Through a detailed study of lanza's *un mundo imaginario*, this presentation will illustrate the challenges faced when preparing a graphic score, working with computer generated sounds, and most importantly telling a meaningful story to the listener.

Argentinean-born, Canadian composer, alcides lanza, began studying music theory, counterpoint, and piano at the age of nine. Upon finishing high school, he began studying architecture at the University of Rosario, but he cut his studies short to become a musician. lanza then moved to Buenos Aires where he studied composition and became intrigued with electro acoustic music.

In 1964, the Institute di Tella in Buenos Aires opened an electro acoustic music studio, but lanza was looking for more. He moved to New York in 1965 to study at the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Centre. In 1970, lanza became director of the electro acoustic studies of McGill University.

Since moving to Montreal, lanza has become known as a talented teacher and composer. His works with Group of the Electronic Music Studio (GEMS) at McGill University and his personal attention to each of his composition students, and the student body at large, demonstrate his dedication to the guiding of young musicians and composers.

alcides lanza, Biography

Composer alcides lanza was born into a musical family on June 2, 1929, in Rosario, Argentina. lanza's father, Antonio, was a conductor and guitarist with an Argentinean tango group in their hometown of Timbues.

When lanza was nine years old, his father won the lottery and offered his two sons their choice of gifts. The older son, Edgardo, chose a bicycle, while the youngest, alcides, chose a piano. This was the beginning of lanza's career as a musician.

Though lanza was a very active child, in 1933, he was stricken with a kidney disease and was not permitted to practice sports for the following nine years. As a result, lanza became very interested in both music and visual art, which may be the root of his passion for beautiful graphic scores.

At the age of nine, lanza left his family and moved to Rosario to live with his uncle, a famous author and playwright. During his time with his uncle, lanza studied music theory, counterpoint, and piano. Upon finishing high school, he began his studies in architecture at the University of Rosario; however, he cut his studies short to become a musician.

After moving to Buenos Aires to study composition with the famous Spanish composer, Julian Bautista, lanza began exploring various compositional techniques and styles. Studying

the works of Bartók and Stravinsky, lanza said he was introduced to a world of music that inspired him to continue his writing.

As a result of lanza's interest in experimental music, he became intrigued by electroacoustic music. In 1964 the Argentinean Instituto di Tella opened an electroacoustic music studio, but lanza was looking for more. lanza moved to New York in 1965 to study at the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Centre. In 1970 after presenting two of his compositions at the Contemporary Music Festival of Madrid, lanza became acquainted with Bruce Mather, a professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Mather was looking for a composition director for the electroacoustic studios of McGill University and encouraged lanza to apply for the position.

Since moving to Montreal, lanza has become known as a talented teacher as well as a composer. His work with Group of the Electronic Music Studio (GEMS) at McGill University and his personal attention to each of his composition students, and the student body at large, demonstrate his dedication to education and the guiding of young musicians and composers.

alcides lanza as Pedagogue

To better understand alcides lanza's teaching style, it was necessary to contact his former students and ask how they see lanza as a teacher and musician. The students were asked the following six questions:

1. What was your musical background before going to McGill and meeting alcides?
2. How has alcides' teachings influenced you as a composer, and as an individual?
3. Do you feel that alcides teaches through his compositions? If possible, please be specific regarding pieces and lessons learned. Do you find that alcides uses his music as a tool to express his views on extra-musical ideas?
4. Did alcides and his compositions change how you looked at music and life in general? How so?
5. How is alcides' pedagogical approach different from other teachers (composition or otherwise) with whom you have worked?
6. How would you describe alcides' teaching philosophy?

From lanza's Students' Point of View

The respondents who answered the questionnaire are all at different points in their musical careers: Some are professors, some teachers, some composers, and others no longer consider music to be their main profession. However, they each consider lanza to have been of great musical and moral influence.

Many students felt that lanza gave them an opportunity to be open, individual, and to just be themselves. Through exploration, and lanza's tendency to challenge their thought processes, the students were able to truly figure out how they wanted to compose. The students felt that lanza's style was not a dictatorship, but rather a complete democracy. lanza stayed on the sidelines, prepared to give advice, but avoided controlling the students and rather expected them to take ownership of their own compositions and learning environments.

lanza's individualism, optimism, and energy are all things that his students greatly admire and, in turn, adopted for themselves. Noting that lanza's music is both fun and interesting also encouraged them to take a similar path in their compositional styles.

lanza required his students to be themselves as a composer. This is something that he never taught outright, but it was certainly transmitted tacitly through his own example. He is known for changing the way his students look at music and their lives as composers and musicians. lanza gives his students the tools needed to compose and then expects them to proceed. He is always there to guide his students, but he allowed them to be themselves.

Respected as a man of principle, lanza changed his students' perception of what music actually is, specifically regarding contemporary music. lanza's style of notation introduces students to a different world of musical expression. Encouraging his students to push limits; however, lanza instilled in them that one must first have a clear picture of one's own expectations.

From working with lanza, students learn that they need to *challenge* rather than *please* the listener and, therefore, began to break expectations. lanza encouraged students to seek out what was meaningful to them as musicians and composers. lanza teaches indirectly through his art and he is more interested in everyone bringing something to the table and participating collaboratively rather than lecturing. He is self-effacing, but extremely self-confident and the ultimate facilitator. lanza encourages a sense of freedom from the traditional score, openness to non-traditional sound elements, and performance as the context for art.

lanza's approach to composition, more specifically notation and performance practice, introduced many potential concepts and possibilities for his students – meaning that the freedom that they experienced from graphic notation was inspirational in their compositional approach.

As a teacher, lanza encouraged the students to take different approaches to their traditional way of composing and to expand their horizons. Most of what was learned from lanza was through his compositions, specifically how to develop a coherent body of music.

lanza influenced young composers by first and foremost by changing their procedural way of working. Insisting that everything be notated by hand, compositions are given an organic feeling indirectly requiring the student to think about phrasing, playability, and orchestration.

One of the main elements that his students remember regarding lanza's teaching was his style of mentorship. lanza treats all of his students with the same respect that he would a professional musician or composer. One student said that lanza's life experiences as a composer guided her in her education. There was never a point where lanza imposed any judgment or ego with the educational process. Treating all students as peers and not as students gives them more confidence to set challenges and take compositional risks. His playful attitude supports his approach to composition and encourages his students to remain true to their personality.

lanza's sense of humour and lighthearted approach to his compositions has influenced many of his students. Always open to new and innovative ideas, at the *heart* of lanza's approach was a profound playfulness that has remained with his students both as a composer and person in general.

lanza offers an element of exploration in his music. However, this exploration is something experienced by the performer more so than the listener, as the listener is witnessing someone else's explorations. As a teacher, lanza expected his students to learn by doing, so it is not surprising that he has the same expectations from the musicians who perform his works.

lanza's Pedagogical Approach

lanza's pedagogical approach is to be true to the music and to teach the whole student. This approach encourages his students to experience life and to reflect upon those experiences in

their compositions. lanza's approach is very democratic and he encourages the students to take ownership of their learning. lanza guides students to self-discover and understand the mechanisms of artistic production and presentation.

lanza's teaching philosophy is to give students ownership of their compositions. Every student that participated in this research was adamant about the fact that lanza gave them the tools needed to be musicians and composers, but never confined their style or approach to *his* expectations.

As an educator, lanza identifies the capabilities and learning styles of each student, and assists in their development as composers. He stresses the importance of students learning through discovery, by exploring first familiar, and subsequently unfamiliar, resources.

lanza creates a supportive environment where there is mutual respect between himself and his students. He requires students to set individual goals, and though his standards are very high, his students strive to *adopt* these standards rather than *satisfy* them. lanza encourages students to be individual in their approach to learning and develop new strengths and identify challenges with the support of peers.

un mundo imaginario

The score of *un mundo imaginario* is challenging when it is first read, however, it is simple to understand once the indications of the composer are studied. The text of *un mundo imaginario* is "...*un imaginario mundo interior...un niño ilusorio que se aleja en la niebla...and vanishes...*" The English translation is "...an imaginary interior world...an illusory child who drifts far away into the mist...and vanishes..."

lanza is known for playing with text in his vocal works. This compositional technique is demonstrated in *un mundo imaginario* through his experimentation with bilingual texts by moving letters and syllables around to create new words. The new words may be semantic or part of an imaginary language. The words that lanza created from the letters and syllables of the text are as follows: for "*un imaginario mundo*," *mudo* [speechless], *magi* [king], *oirá!* [listen!], *maga* [magician], *goma* [eraser], *noria* [water-wheel], *agrio* [sour], *magro* [thin], *rima* [rhyme], *origami* [origami], *muda* [change], and *mundane* [a lot of people]; for "*interior*," *tero* [Argentinean bird from the Pampas], *terror* [terrible], and *oror* [horror]; and from a combination of the words of the complete text, *mundo niño* [child's world], *niño mudo* [speechless child], and *mundo mudo* [speechless world].

The vocal and choral works of alcides lanza are what he labels "musical theatre." Although, *un mundo imaginario* uses lighting effects and small stage movement to support both the text and the music, it is not musical theatre in the traditional sense. A vocal difficulty that may arise in *un mundo imaginario* is one of finding pitches. There are sections of the work where the tape is heard for up to 15 seconds, and the singers are then expected to enter on a specific pitch. The composer does give permission for the use of pitch pipes or tuning forks during the performance. However, if at all possible, this should be avoided because the pitch pipes will take away from the visual performance. Though the tape is composed of electronic and computerized music, with enough preparation, the ensemble should be able to find their notes from the sounds provided. lanza uses the tritone as an intervallic theme that can be found in all four voices throughout the piece. The vocal writing is very chromatic and needs specific attention for intonation purposes.

Though *un mundo imaginario* can be challenging when first studied, once the composer's directions are understood, it can provide an ensemble with the opportunity to experience

performing as chamber musicians. Taking each individual cell and preparing it outside of the score will make the piece very accessible. After the singers have prepared their individual cells, it is just a matter of placing the cells together to form the piece. When preparing a chorus for a performance of *un mundo imaginario*, it is vital that the singers first understand the purpose of the composition. This piece was written as a reflection on the death of the composer's son. The following quote is taken from an interview with lanza:

mundo imaginario is an imaginary world. Maybe it's just me, all my life is imaginary things, I invented myself. But that piece directly refers to a child I lost...it's a kid that didn't make it. The idea that I would write about my son, was probably there twenty years before, but I couldn't do it. So you know, I had to make peace with myself. Serious business (personal communication, September 2004).

Author's Note:

The information for this paper was taken from the author's interviews and discussions with alcides lanza and his students, September 2004 to April 2005.

Endnote

1. The composer intentionally spells his name with lowercase letters.