

Going out
Interview: Peter Bacchus

12/1/09 9:15 AM
ShareThis RSS Print

- * Content
- * Images (1)

US musician and composer Peter Bacchus has made his home here—we asked him about his life in Barcelona, his music and influences, ahead of his interactive concert, *Entre melodias de nexos*, at the new Auditorium of the Conservatori del Liceu in December 2009
Peter Bacchus

Related

- * Gabriel Gould
- * *Entre melodias de nexos*

You initially trained as a flutist and then started composing—do you still perform?

Yes, I am still very active as a flutist, I love to play the flute and it would be difficult to stop playing. The flute really represents my first and most direct contact with music. It is the instrument through which I learned melody, phrasing, intensity and the expressiveness of music. That never leaves you.

You have been lucky enough to work with people like John Corigliano and Narcís Bonet; how have they influenced your work and can you name anyone else who has guided what you do over the years?

I was indeed lucky to work with Corigliano and Bonet. In a way of speaking, I would say that each of them represents some of the best from the two worlds of the unfettered freshness and directness of American music at its best, on one hand, and the great tradition of the Boulanger teachings, as distilled by a phenomenal talent such as Bonet, on the other hand. Anthony Newman is another figure who has been a beacon for me: instrumental virtuoso, prolific composer, improviser and a man who also has a profound musical mind.

You have lived in Barcelona for 18 years, how has the city/area been important to your work and how does it differ to your home city?

When you move from one place to another as I did, coming from New York to Barcelona, you have to start again in the new place to make it your home. In changing countries, the new beginning is even more pronounced, since you have to learn the language (in this case, the two languages) and assimilate the

new culture. Barcelona has become my home. It is where I work and where I have many friends and colleagues who are close to me. The whole musical scene here in Barcelona is one in constant change and growth, not only in classical and contemporary classical music, but in many other styles such as jazz, experimental and different styles of ethnic music from around the world. It is exciting to be here. I think Barcelona is emerging as a musical force, and particularly in the area of new music. In a way, it is the place to be.

Tell me about project Grup21

Grup21 is an ensemble dedicated to performing new music by Catalan and Spanish composers, as well as international composers. I started the group with colleagues in 2002. It is a Catalan group. We are based here and we all live here. Most of the performers are Catalan and originally from Barcelona, but the group is composed of Catalan, American, Irish, German, Polish, and other musicians. Music cuts across borders and different languages by definition. The objectives of Grup21 are to cultivate and introduce Catalan and international composers to the Barcelona audiences, and to project Catalan music and Catalan music making beyond our borders. That is what we are doing.

How important is it to you to work with musicians/composers from all over the world and do you deem 'place' as an essential motif in composing?

It is essential to work with musicians and composers from around the world. It is like letting the winds blow fresh air into us and it allows us to blow some of our fresh air out into the world. It is an important step in the growth and learning process for composers, performers and audiences to be able to hear music written by and performed by musicians from other countries and cultures, just as it is for music from Barcelona to be heard and appreciated across the ocean in America or up north in Finland, for example. This has always been the case with music since the days of the troubadours.

Of course, the place where you live conditions you to a great degree when you compose. Two examples of that for me are the Magnificat and the Missa Brevis that I was commissioned to write for Cor Vivaldi of Barcelona. It would be hard for me to imagine receiving these same commissions in the US. That came about in part because of the special choral tradition in Catalunya as well as the Catholic tradition here. Writing those two pieces were wonderful opportunities. Another was the commission that I received to write for the Cobla Sant Jordi, one of the best coblas [group that plays traditional Catalan music, especially to accompany sardana dances] there is in the world. Obviously, writing for the Catalan cobla is an opportunity that only exists here. Also, over the years one absorbs more and more of the musical traditions of the country. It takes time, but the process is inevitable.

You have had work performed and have worked at some of Barcelona's great venues—tell me what your favourite one has been and a little bit about the new Conservatori del Liceu?

I have to say that the Palau de la Música Catalana is a real favourite hall for me. It is beautiful and architecturally striking, has an excellent acoustic and it really represents in many ways the heart and soul of Catalan music making.

The Conservatori del Liceu is an important Barcelona musical institution, and it is the only private conservatori superior in all of Spain. It is important that it exists and flourishes in Barcelona. The fact that they have inaugurated their new building with a beautiful concert hall dynamises the music scene here even more.

The concert in Barcelona will be an interactive performance—what are the reasons behind this and do you think it will be successful in attracting new audiences to the genre?

It is important for us to work with other mediums such as dance, film or poetry. It is enormously stimulating and this makes contemporary music accessible to so many more listeners and new audiences. As dedicated performers of contemporary music, we are behooved to reach out to the public in as many ways as conditions allow us to. Audience building is accomplished one concert at a time, meaning that if we can attract some new listeners to our concerts, the only possibility we have of satisfying them is if we offer a sufficiently varied and stimulating programming so as to make it worth while to get out, buy a ticket and come to our concerts again. That is a business principal that we can't ignore. It is a challenge.

I think that if we continue to program as we have been doing, with dance in one concert, film in another, the traditional cobla instruments, and other elements, we can contribute to transforming the perception of contemporary music. It will start to be perceived more as an inclusive art form, and not an exclusive one apt only for those who are already initiated. Clearly, the already initiated, small but avid contemporary music public is important to us, but just as important are the newcomers who we are going after with our concerts too.

What other work are you involved with at the moment; what are your future musical plans?

Grup21 keeps me very occupied every fall especially when we have our fall concert series. Putting together three or four different programs of new music, organising it and directing it, all so that things go smoothly and professionally, all that takes a lot of attention. Future plans are the continued growth of Grup21. We have a new CD coming out this fall and another two CDs in the planning. We have been creating a series of chamber concertos for each of the instruments of Grup21. This year we premier the fifth one for clarinet by Lleonard Balada. These new concertos are published by Dinsic Publicacions of Barcelona and we will be recording all of them. The next two years will bring the sixth and seventh concertos, thus completing the set of pieces. That is exciting to be bringing this project to fruition.

My future plans are to continue to perform concerts both here and in the US and to compose for a couple of commissions that are taking shape now.

What are your favourite instruments to write music for?

Well, whatever I'm writing for at the moment is my favourite instrument to write for. But I would say that the symphony orchestra is a real favourite of mine, as is the string quartet. They are both beautifully refined formations that offer a myriad of sounds and colours. Obviously, writing for my own instrument, the flute, is important too.

Who are you listening to at the moment and is there anyone you would recommend to people who are perhaps new to classical music?

I'm often listening to classical music, such as Beethoven piano sonatas recently, or a beautiful string instrument version of the Goldberg Variations by Bach. I would suggest to new listeners that they get a few CDs of music by Bach (Double violin concerto, well tempered clavier), Beethoven (Piano Sonatas and symphonies), Mozart (Clarinet Concerto, Requiem, operas) or Brahms (Cello sonatas, First and Fourth symphonies). Those are just some suggestions that come to mind. Put them on and absorb them over time. Put them on when you are doing other things, but also give some undivided attention to them too. As to modern composers: Corigliano's Pied Piper Fantasy, Fantasy on an Ostinato; Bonet's La Pell de Brau, and Newman's American Symphony and Requiem, Dutilleux's Cello concerto and string quartet.

There is so much great music out there. Go out to concerts and listen to live music. Observe and listen to the performers and try to feel what they feel when they are playing as you listen to them up close.

ENTRE MELODIAS DE NEXOS, Conservatori del Liceu, December 10th, 8.30pm, €15. Places are limited; to book yours in advance, call 646 901 167 or mail: inf@grup21music.com

This is an extended version of an article published in the December 2009 issue of Barcelona Metropolitan magazine.