

Interview with Composer Graciela Jiménez

BY RUTH PRIETO

Graciela Jiménez is an Argentine pianist and composer based in Spain. Here she talks about her latest album, a recording of solo piano works and works for cello and piano, released on the Naxos label.

What can you tell us about this new collection?

This CD includes some of my pieces for piano written over a long period, from 1999 to 2013, and more recent chamber music. I was inspired to write the first of the piano pieces, *En los ojos de las llamas* (In the Llamas' Eyes, referring to the mammals living in the Puna grasslands, in the high Andean plateau), by an image conjured by a fragment of the lyrics ("All alone the salt moon looks at itself in the llamas' eyes") from a zamba by Leguizamón and Castilla, and by a Japanese haiku describing the sea and a thick mist. This poetic syncretism that came to my mind suggested a landscape, an emotional state, an "impossible" place. It isn't program music, but I could picture this place, this emotional space: sometimes tender, sometimes asphyxiating, sometimes a cry of pain. The constant fragmentation of the discourse depicts an emotional rift.

The *Tres piezas para piano* (Three Pieces for Piano)—I. "En lugar de un prólogo" (Instead of a Foreword). II. "Caminos del Espejo III" (Paths on the Mirror). III. "Silencios" (Silences, 1999)—inspired by poetry by Anna Ajmátova and Alejandra Pizarnik, are aphoristic pieces that remind us of the world of jazz. In fact, they were performed in a themed concert entitled *The Influence of Jazz on Spanish Piano* as part of the *Jazz Impact* series.

Baguala (2004) is a version for piano of the original for a chamber group. It evokes the lonely, painful, and austere beauty of the Argentinian Puna grasslands.

En la Quebrada de Humahuaca (In the Quebrada de Humahuaca, 2009), dedicated to Dora De Marínis, pays homage to Alberto Ginastera. The piece has been strongly influenced by the rhythm of Creole dances, such as malambo or vidala, and patterns taken from Afro-Cuban music, especially the son. These rhythms (or rhythmically and melodically themed embryos) seem briefly *literal* before fading away and transforming, or shattering or dissolving. You can hear fragments of children's songs in the melody. They're the ones I listened to when I was young, which took me by surprise as I didn't really like them. Some time after finishing the piece, I discovered there are veiled, fragmented melodic lines taken from *La vaca estudiosa* (The Studious Cow) by María Elena Walsh. The lyrics of this song, which doesn't have a particularly good melodic and rhythmic line, put the animal in that remote place called Quebrada de Humahuaca. This piece is a fantasia, free in form: The episodes or sound blocks are stitched together like a patchwork with the seams showing. There's no continuity. It's a type of sound Cubism. *La luz de enero* (January's Light) is an instrumental version for cello and piano based on the original series for soprano and piano (texts from the *Sonnets of Dark Love* by Federico García Lorca. And *Mediterráneo* (Mediterranean, 2014) is a piece in four move-

ments inspired by photographs.

Your CD consists of six pieces inspired by the landscape and folk melodies of your native country, Argentina. What comes from tradition and what comes from avant-garde in your music?

In my music, the Argentinian landscape plays the role of a mental and emotional reconstruction. It isn't descriptive or program music. With varying emphasis, tradition has suggested rhythms and melodic expressions from Argentinian Creole dances, and Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, and Río de La Plata rhythms. The material stems from folk music, but the approach is contemporary. I think it's an amalgamation of materials and compositional processes leading to expressiveness, a very contemporary pain. The way the material is presented and narrated is avant-garde. And I understand "landscape" to be not just the urban or natural world, but also the human landscape, in other words everything around me.

What are the influences and roots of your piano music? Where does your inspiration come from?

That's not an easy question to answer. There's a difference between choosing the influences I'd like to have and the ones I actually have or that can be perceived in my music. So, I think I'll just mention the influences I'd love to have. Given the choice, I'd want them to be Henri Dutilleux, Tōru Takemitsu, Gustav Mahler, George Crumb, György Kurtág, Byzantine chant, Egberto Gismonti, Hermeto Pascoal, the sorrowful songs of the indigenous peoples in north-west Argentina, the tenderness of the melodic lines of the Argentine Littoral, the music of Río de La Plata, the passion of the new tango by Astor Piazzolla, the syncretism of European jazz, the effervescence of Afro-Cuban music, the sensuality of Afro-Brazilian music, and the rich sound and texture of gamelan from Indonesia. I'd also love to be influenced by Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry, Tarkovsky's films, and Chagall's paintings. As for my musical roots, they might be aerial, or they might mirror my DNA. I've got African, European, and indigenous ancestry. All my music is inspired by the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Alejandra Pizarnik, Anna Akhmatova, Japanese haikus, and children's songs. And everything around me is present, too.

Contemporary music over recent decades has been marked by huge aesthetic freedom. How would you define your music, your signs of identity and your aesthetics?

I think style is formed by multiple aspects and is a complex issue. I agree with Josep Auner when he says there's never been less agreement than now on how to establish limits between different music styles or how to measure concepts such as originality, progress, and historic importance, or whether these are even still valid. I think there are stories of many places and languages in my music. I feel close to where borders meet.

Are you a pianist who composes, or a composer who happens to be a pianist?

I alternate between both activities, depending on my needs. I usually perform my own music for piano and I always play with my ensemble. But it's also interesting to be outside my works sometimes, to sit in the audience and watch another pianist interpreting the piece his or her way.

In which artistic and personal moment do you find yourself as a pianist and composer?

I think I've always felt that I'm in that silence that Ramón Andrés calls "the world itself": "attentive 'listening' in all directions, noticing, as stripped back as possible, the voice that everything that exists has become." André Gide says that the work of art is a balance—or imbalance, I would add—outside of time, an artificial health.

The six pieces include three world premiere recordings. Tell us about the responsibility of being "the first to perform."

I think there's always great responsibility, because when we press a key, a world opens up. The echo a sound can have is unpredictable and irretrievable: an echo or its resonance. The responsibility is always huge. The first recording is important; it's probably also one of the most exciting. The one that—without a doubt or with many—becomes a reference. But the next recordings also involve a great deal of responsibility, possibly because they will be compared with the first.

If somebody asked you to formulate listening guidelines for the album, what would they be?

Close your eyes and listen.

What are the defining characteristics of the six works in the collection and what is the common thread that runs through them?

I think this album contains the intense beating of a period in my life. It's a type of private diary. Poetic inspiration, including visual poetry, is the constant background noise in my music. What brings all the work together, or what it has in common, is my personal view of everything around me. But I think you can notice an "aroma" or "accent" or a manner of "speaking" that is really quite personal.

Why would you recommend this CD?

It's modern music that is highly expressive. It's a difficult album in commercial terms. I'd say that it's a "signature" album, but released by a large record label. That's not very usual and poses interesting questions. The booklet is by Arnoldo Liberman and Dora De Marinis—two more reasons to recommend the CD, besides the excellent musicians, of course.

G. JIMÉNEZ *En los ojos de las llamas. Tres piezas. Baguala. En la Quebrada de Humahuaca. La luz de enero¹. Mediterráneo¹* • Dora De Marinis (pn); ¹Matías Villafañe (vc) • NAXOS 8.579040 (66:16)

Born in Córdoba, Argentina in 1965, Graciela Jiménez is now resident in Granada. As an artist she engages with multiple art forms, including poetry, visual arts, and photography. Both performers here are Argentinian also: The cellist, Matías Villafañe, is a member of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic. Dora De Marinis trained in Mendoza, in Buenos Aires, and in Germany.

The 2013 work for solo piano, *En los ojos de las llamas* (In the Llama's Eyes), is a portrait in music of the northern part of Argentina, its austere landscape, and the llamas that inhabit this forbidding place. The mode of expression is frequently fragmentary, with snippets of what could be folk music flitting across the music. The piano recording would benefit from more depth, but there is no doubting De Marinis's technique, nor her way with this music.

The *Tre piezas* go back to 1999 and actually relate to Jiménez's interest in poetry. Inspired by a poetry reading whose title translates as "the Madness of Living," Jiménez chose poems by two of her favorite poets, Anna Akhmatova and Alejandra Pizarnik; these three pieces are Jiménez's responses via the piano. With roots in the musings of Schumann miniatures and a harmonic vocabulary of Latin America and even jazz, *Tre Piezas* is an intriguing tapestry of ideas. Again, De Marinis has a full grasp of the music's workings. In another mode entirely is the 2014 *Baguala*. Originally written for flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano, and percussion, the reduction for solo piano emphasizes the rugged dissonance of the harmonic palette. The title refers to a melancholy folk melody from north-western Argentina, while the sparse textures seem to link it to the first work on the disc, *En los ojos de las llamas*. The relative brevity of *Baguala* makes it all the more poignant; this performance complements the original scoring (a performance can be found on an album entitled *Citas y Collages*, available via cdbaby.com).

The more extended *En la Quebrada de Humahuaca* of 2009, dedicated to the present pianist, is again inspired by place, the mountains of north-western Argentina. It is also a tribute to Ginastera, whose exuberance seems mirrored in Jiménez's score (one thinks especially of Ginastera's *Danzas argentinas*). Like Ginastera, Jiménez understands how to create a virtuoso effect while writing expertly for the piano, specifically how the notes lie under the hands. Vital, almost at times primal, this piece emerges under De Marinis's fingers as fresh and exciting.

The final two offerings are of works for cello and piano. The four-movement *La luz de enero* (January's Light) has been recorded in its form for soprano and piano by Elena Sancho Pereg and the composer on the piano on a disc entitled *Amor oscuro* (available via cdbaby.com). This is the world premiere of its version for cello and piano. Inspired by Lorca (*Sonnets of Dark Love*), and ideas of love's pain and the relationship of that pain to a longing for death, Jiménez's frame of reference is large, from folk music through Impressionism to Expressionism, jazz, and even dodecaphony. Matías Villafañe is a supremely eloquent soloist, enabling the pining lines of the close of the first movement, "Soneto de la guirnalda de rosas" (Sonnet of the Wreath of Roses), to resonate fully. The piano's expressive melodies of "Llagas de amor" (Love's Wounds), the second movement, are beautifully done. Again, though, a certain dryness to the recording affects the experience, this time more in the enjoyment of Villafañe's sound. He is clearly an exceptional cellist; the high-lying melodies are supremely expressive and also in tune. The monumentalism of "El poeta dice la verdad" (The poet tells the truth) is fascinating, as that sense of import is retained even when the texture thins right

down; but it is the chthonic utterances of "Sonetta de la Carta" (Sonnet of the Letter) that seek to take us to the deepest of spaces. And space is indeed what this movement has. The cello lines seem almost improvised within a sea of melancholy. Contrast between granitic piano chords and near-vocal cello responses creates an expressive dissonance that is most memorable.

Finally, there comes the 2014 *Mediterráneo*, written to accompany a photographic exhibition by Antonio Arabesco at the University of Granada. This has been previously recorded by Orfilia Saiz Vega, with the composer herself on the piano. The writing here is predominantly austere, with a quasi-Minimalist aspect to the second movement, "Primer silencio" (First Silence). The third movement, "Come un espejo" (Like a Mirror), seems to invoke the spirit of Debussy's *Prélude* "Des pas sur la neige," nudging the soundworld towards Spain or Latin America, perhaps. The most unhurried of the four movements, silences speak volumes in it. Finally, there is "Ecos" (Echoes), in which the piano provides a sonic pool of tranquility over which the cello sings.

The composer's website includes a number of videos that will give an idea of her music (gracielajimenez.com/videos/). There are a number of world premiere recordings here, enhancing the value of this appealing and stimulating disc. **Colin Clarke**

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This disc is my first exposure to the music of Graciela Jiménez, an Argentinian-born composer residing in Spain since 1989. Judging by this recital, I would say she's forged an interesting amalgam of varied influences and subordinated them to her highly personal idiom and expressivity. Listen to the Impressionist opening measures of *En los ojos de las llamas* (an extended fantasy), the jazz chords and gestures that color several works, and the fleeting, probably not intentional, reminiscences of sundry composers—a notable example being what I hear as an echo of Gershwin's Three Preludes at around the one minute mark in *En los ojos*—all the while appreciating her distinctive melodic profile and knack for unusual piano figuration. One work in which her admiration for and emulation of a fellow composer is deliberate is her homage to Alberto Ginastera, *En la Quebrada de Humahuaca*. She's captured his hypnotic mix of dance-based rhythmic volatility, jarring clusters, and plaintive lyricism perfectly, and absorbed and transmuted it into much more than a pastiche. Pianist Dora De Marín's dynamic, at times ferocious, reading is no doubt well informed by her intimate understanding of Ginastera's music, having recorded his complete *oeuvre* for piano, including his demanding concertos. This is definitely not music in which Jiménez's tendency to melancholy (as noted in the booklet) predominates, although to be fair it does have its soulful moments. The aggressive single-note "proclamation" heralding the *Tres piezas para piano* belies their consistently mild demeanor. These are brief, gentle ballads with a hint of jazz in their makeup: In an irreverent mood I might dub them sophisticated cocktail-piano stylings. They're immediately followed by *Baguala*'s anxious Expressionism and percussive interjections—a sharp contrast and proof of Jiménez's emotional range. The four movements of *La luz de enero*, an adaptation for cello and piano of her song-settings of Federico García Lorca's poetry, conceal a latent passion within their deceptively tranquil but admittedly melancholy surface. The several commentators quoted in the booklet find them a perfect transposition of poetry into music, suffused with Lorca's obsession with Death and Desire (Eros and Thanatos): I'll leave it to you to decide. Cellist Matías Villafañe, who ably partners Marín in the Lorca adaptations, is strikingly effective in "Despertar," the first of four vignettes inspired by Antonio Arabesco's photographic exhibition *Mediterráneo*. It's a cleverly constructed cello solo—the set also includes a piece for solo piano—in which Jiménez juxtaposes statements in the richly sonorous lower reaches of the cello with answers from the upper register. It's as if the cello is engaged in a conversation with itself, a deeply felt interior dialogue to which an ascending pizzicato passage adds textural variety. I wouldn't want to end this overview without mentioning *Ecos*, the disc's last track: Not at all melancholy but rather sweet, with its gently lapping "vamp" that recalls Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan* floating beneath the mellifluous cello. **Robert Schulsinger**

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Graciela Jiménez Works for Solo Piano Works for Piano and Cello is the latest recording for **Fanfare** May/June 2019 **89**