

Stefano Picciano

Alirio Díaz

through Folk and Classical Music

Translation by Enrico Selleri

UTORPHEUS

*To my parents,
for all I have seen
and I am still seeing*

LB 10

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ISBN 978-88-8109-471-4

Stampato in Italia - Printed in Italy 2011 - Global Print S.r.l. - Via degli Abeti 17/1 - Gorgonzola (Mi)

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PREFACE

We have to thank Stefano Picciano and the publishing company Ut Orpheus for carrying out this articulated and deep study on Alirio Díaz' work and his connections with the human and cultural roots of the artist.

Italy has benefited for over fifty years of the continuous presence of this guitar giant who gave many concerts and courses throughout our Country and we cannot forget the many editions for Zanibon in Padua. It's a good thing, although much is still left to be done, that an Italian author and editor give such a great contribution to the organic and systemic knowledge of this contribution and of its meaning for today's and tomorrow's cultural life.

But according to the natural course of life, there is one creative role in society: the role of the genius. No one expresses what is felt by a society better than the genius in its midst, who has been given an eminently social charism. Most people feel that the creative work of a genius expresses what they feel better than they themselves could express it. This is why we feel that our melancholy is so much better represented in the cadenzas of Chopin or the poetry of Leopardi than if we ourselves were to set it down in notes or words.

(L. Giussani, *At the origin of the Christian claim*,
McGill-Queen's University Press)

This definition of genius – even with its artistic meaning – helps us to perceive how, in reality and at the origin, the border between “learned” and “folk” makes no sense. Not everyone “has studied” or has a great talent, but what the genius expresses belongs to all of us. It is necessary to bear this in mind today because, in an era in which the importance of common ideals has been shrinking, even in music the word “learned” has become a synonym for cultivated, academic, therefore not abstruse, intellectualistic, unintelligible; on the other hand the word “folk” seems to carry, by now, simply the meaning of “naïf”, rough, or even convey the meaning of commodification and consumeristic massification.

In this volume, as a synthesis between the folk substrate and the academic language, authors belonging to the so-called National Schools are mentioned and moreover Chopin and Liszt. However we could even

mention Bach, the Renaissance (Díaz would mention Chilesotti's studies on folk music), polyphony, Gregorian chants and we cannot forget the Opera and all that its knowledge has conveyed for generations very close to ours (I'm just thinking of the arias preserved by our grandparents, who were maybe even illiterate ...).

This book clearly explains to us the example of Alirio Díaz's career, this "farmer who played the cuatro", looked after the cattle and learnt by heart the *Divine Comedy*, who later became one of the most celebrated virtuous people of our time, admired both by Celibidache and by Rodrigo, who interpreted vitality and wisdom as an outcome of that "substrate" that he himself always remembered with gratitude. This example indicates (and so do on the other hand Villa Lobos's and Sojo's arts, here mentioned) that still today learned and folk aspects are – can and must be – the same thing. This will be difficult until that common ideal feeling which generates a people and his maestros is alive.

In thanking by turns, on this wonderful occasion, Maestro Díaz for all that his presence has meant for me, I feel I can humbly but firmly tell him that I can find the echoes of his artistic ideals still today. Some years ago the Maestro was stunned because I begged him (he said I was the first ever among his pupils) to give me the texts of those Venezuelan chants that he had transformed into wonderful guitar solos; a short time later I could tell him that some of those chants, wonderfully accompanied by "Sojo – Díaz", were by then sung by thousands of people. "Venezuelan music never had such a large audience", he commented once.

But another example of continuousness is represented by those composers (their existence is also documented in the series that I am editing for Ut Orpheus) who do not give up putting their creativity at the service of a music which, albeit challenging contemporary time, is tendentially "open" to everyone.

Thank you, Maestro!

PIERO BONAGURI

In that case, Antonio, thou mayest as well do us the pleasure of singing a little, that the gentleman, our guest, may see that even in the mountains and woods there are musicians.

(M. de Cervantes)

INTRODUCTION

No le habría pedido a mi infancia, a mi gente y a mis aldeas un mejor estrato espiritual, musical y humano.¹

Alirio Díaz's personality pervades this sentence, which summarizes the complex figure of a musician whose important artistic evolution spanned sixty years, and who never relinquished his rural roots, his background as "campesino larense".² On the contrary, he invariably emphasized the power and the particular charm surrounding him as he grew up – the character of folk music, its simplicity and artistic spontaneity. The conversations which the maestro has recently held with us reiterate these sentiments. They may be considered as a starting point for a meditation on his musical personality, leading us to its essential content and enabling us to understand his deep attachment to his background. As Griselda Ponce de León once wrote,

the Latin-American man lives his ethnic and cultural roots thoroughly and with intensity: many never erase that deep feeling – so difficult to express or to explain – of belonging to Mother Earth, and living in deep symbiosis with her throughout their life.³

In the course of the maestro's whole career, this sense of belonging was never lost. In many conversations he especially highlighted a sense of gratitude towards his origins, thus reaffirming the sentence quoted above and focusing on the wealth of the environment where he was born and grew up, much more than on the many great successes that made him an acclaimed figure on the international stage many years later. This folkloric wealth, this popular heritage that shaped Alirio Díaz's first musical education, seems to be what primarily endowed him with his particular musical personality, characterized by the mix of spontaneous

¹ "I could not have asked for a better spiritual, musical and human foundation from my childhood, my people and my villages." A. Díaz, *Al divisar el humo de la aldea nativa*, Monte Avila Editores Latinoamericana, p. 73.

² Farmer from the Lara region.

³ G. Ponce de León, *Il percorso di un artista*, in *Seicorde*, Nov.-Dec. 1993, pp. 14-15.

and classical-academic popular elements. In the article quoted above, Ponce de León defines the maestro as

the point and moment of contact between two worlds and two cultures: on the one hand agricultural South America, tied to its Indian roots, dripping with the blood of the European white colonizers and of the black who settled from foreign lands; and on the other, intellectual Europe, full of culture and centuries of history.

A little further on, she asks: “Did Alirio Díaz entirely fulfill his destiny or did he sacrifice or lose something that belonged to him (...)?” Thus the author addresses the confluence of these cultures on the maestro’s personality, pulled between his popular origins with its enduring vivacity, and the academic education that helped him enter the world of classical music: did Díaz, in this process, deny or lose something of his own, or of his origins?

Alirio Díaz is an altogether unique artistic figure who succeeded in reconciling the apparently divergent character of these two worlds on stages all over the world. This gave rise to an exceptional interpreter who, by combining different cultures and environments, became one of the most singular personalities among the “guitar heroes”. In reply to Milagros Socorro, who was interviewing him,⁴ the maestro said:

Yo no puedo abandonar la guitarra porque ella está dentro de mí (...). Eso equivale a preguntarme si en todos esos años en Europa yo dejé, por un instante, de ser un ciudadano de La Canducha.⁵ ¿Y cómo? Un hombre no puede colgar el alma.⁶

The sentence we quoted at the outset certainly requires analysis of its historical context in order to fully understand the nature of these cultural and human origins to which the maestro always refers. And we also need to bear in mind that this seemingly noteworthy assertion does not necessarily mean that the historical context – which we are going to analyze in brief – is in fact entirely or inevitably favorable.

⁴ M. Socorro, *Un asunto de pulsaciones*, interview to Alirio Díaz downloaded from the internet site www.aliriodiaz.net

⁵ The nickname which the inhabitants of La Candelaria usually give their homeland.

⁶ “I cannot give up my guitar because she is inside me (...). It would be like asking me whether, during all these years in Europe, I ever stopped being, for an instant, an inhabitant of La Canducha. And how? A man cannot leave his soul.”

PART 1

ALIRIO DÍAZ AS A YOUNG MAN (1923-1942)

1. VENEZUELA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, Venezuela's complex history was characterized by political turmoil that made the country unstable and volatile.

The first Spanish settlements in what is now Venezuela date back to 1520, twenty years after Columbus arrived on his third journey to the "New World". In the span of time between this date and 1800, the Spaniards held dominion over the region.

During the course of the 19th century, as throughout Latin America, a strong separatist movement developed and spread. This new chapter of Venezuela's history began on 19 April 1810, when a group of Creoles from Caracas decided to call a meeting of the Town Council in order to declare an autonomous government, justifying this by citing the fact that a Frenchman was on the throne in Spain. This pretext concealed the idea of a struggle for independence from Spain, which clearly came to light when Ferdinand VII was restored to the Spanish throne. After the true intentions of the independence movements were unveiled, many colonies experimented with some form of self-government facilitated by local, Creole-led councils.

The ultimate victory over the Spaniards was in 1821, and in 1830 Venezuela was declared an independent republic.

Thereafter began a long period characterized by "caudillism" (from *caudillo*, meaning "leader"), a political phenomenon in which faction leaders who managed to emerge imposed their dictatorship – until other conflicts arose, thus in turn giving rise to new forms of dictatorship.

The first dictator of the 19th century was Cipriano Castro, who ruled until 1908, when Vice-President Juan Vicente Gómez launched a coup d'état. The latter had already grown used to assuming the presidency since Castro was frequently absent from the country. On 19 December 1908, while Castro was in Paris, Gómez took control and proclaimed himself president, forbidding Castro from returning to Venezuela.

These events gave rise to one of the harshest dictatorships in Venezuelan history.

With the end of this dictatorship, in 1935, the period called “caudillism” also ended. While Gómez was in power, the exploitations of the oil industry began in Venezuela (oil had already been discovered in 1880, but not yet exploited). Many rural inhabitants migrated to the many oil-mining areas, where it was easier to find a job. This shows us the antecedents and motivating factors we will study in greater depth in the following chapter when encountering the environment in which Alirio Díaz grew up – where, instead of agricultural work in the fields, young people had to face oil-field work instead. We thus immediately understand how an economy was highly dependent on foreign countries, and would have been unable to develop autonomously without all the labor opportunities for young people living in poorer areas.

These environmental factors determined Díaz’s early surroundings. Díaz was stricken by poverty and all its consequences, which forced young people to work in the fields while still of school age, or – as already mentioned – flee to the oil fields, as some of Alirio Díaz’s brothers and friends did.

2. ADOLESCENCE: BETWEEN WORK AND *FIESTAS*

As we saw, Venezuela’s difficult political and economic situation frames the environment in which Díaz spent his childhood years. Let us now attend to this more closely to verify and justify Díaz’s assertion of the importance of the cultural, musical and human surroundings in which he was born and grew up.

As we have already seen, the maestro forcefully highlights the importance and vitality of folkloric richness that characterizes his origins, his homeland. In conversation with him, we can perceive these elements as being of such importance that they outweigh many of the troubles that the people of his country had to contend with in those times. When we research the maestro, or read his autobiography, we find that such troubles are offset by the enthusiasm for popular and folkloric wealth that lived so vibrantly amongst this people.

Alirio Díaz was born in La Candelaria, a small village in the midst of a desert, on 12 November 1923. He was the eighth of eleven brothers.

La Candelaria is nothing more than a group of poor farms situated thirty kilometers from Carora. Milagros Socorro describes this area vividly:⁷

The journey to La Candelaria requires patience, strength, a road map and a good reserve of drinkable water (...) Many obstacles face the traveler who, in the end, will come across a hamlet amid the desert which still survives only thanks to a willingness and industry not typical of our world.

In a country as poor as this, where houses were built with “bahareques”⁸ and did not even have a floor (which merely consisted of leveled ground), we can find “gente de mucho amor al trabajo, por lo que, conociendo la aridez de la comarca, el trabajo resultaba ser un ejemplar y verdadero acto de sacrificio”.⁹ The households subsisted by rearing cattle, and agriculture, to which everybody was necessarily devoted. These tasks had to be carried out by children as well, and as soon as they were old enough they were called to help the adults, in most cases instead of going to school.

This is what we read in the maestro’s story:

En ese lugar transcurrió mi infancia, sembrando maíz y papa; y guiando los chivos y puercos. Obviamente no había una escuela allí. Un tío mío me enseñó las primeras letras, a leer y escribir. En esa época, por lo general, el magisterio de las aldeas lo desempeñaba un miembro de la familia; y también había gente que se dedicaba a la enseñanza rural, deambulando por los case-ríos y llevando las luces de las letras por ahí. Sin embargo, en ese mundo, apartado y deprimido, había gente letrada; (...) Mi abuelo materno, a quien no conocí, era uno de ellos; un ombre culto, sin duda. Todavía conservo un par de libros que heredé de él, incluido el Metodo de guitarra de Ferdinando Carulli¹⁰ y la Divina Comedia de Dante. Siendo, pues, un niño, yo recitaba tercetos da la Divina Comedia (...). Eso me sostenía, calmaba mi inmensa necesidad de formación y cultura (...).¹¹

⁷ M. Socorro, *cit.*

⁸ Material made of mud and wood sticks, used to build the walls and the roofs of the farms in the area.

⁹ “Hard-working people who believed that work had to be an example and true act of sacrifice”. A. Díaz, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Carulli’s method, the first guitar book that Díaz got hold of, belonged to his mother’s father who had purchased it in 1838. In the early 1940s in Venezuela the methods of the Italian guitar players of the 19th century were still in use, as proved by this book’s existence.

¹¹ “In this place I spent my childhood sowing maize and potatoes and pasturing sheep and swine. Obviously there was no school there. An uncle of mine taught me the first

Thus we become acquainted with the salient aspects of this rural environment and can understand how, in a big family such as Díaz's, everyone's contribution was needed to support each other in a situation of great poverty. At the same time this story presents us with a very inquisitive young man, who wishes to learn about and fully grasp everything he comes across, even if by chance or informally. It is therefore no wonder that by the time Díaz was about 16, he had not only learned to read and write, but had also written a short work on the history of La Candelaria: "Una cosa infantil, escrita a mano con letra de molde. Me movía un gran deseo de saber, de averiguar lo que había sucedido en mi aldea hasta ese día en que yo escribía su historia".¹²

The young Díaz therefore showed a curiosity, a desire to know and study, which would lead him to question simply accepting the kind of job that his circumstances would normally otherwise have reserved for him. An example of this curiosity is the way in which Alirio devotes himself passionately to every aspect of culture that comes his way:

Todo me interesaba, y los temas que más me atraían los aprendía a memoria o los copiaba diligentemente en hojas sueltas o en pequeños cuadernos. (...) Recuerdo de haber grabado en mi memoria sentencias filosóficas de Sócrates, Séneca, Ovidio, Platón, Descartes (...).¹³

This curiosity, this wish to know that the maestro would never lose and that would later give rise to a deeper interest in philosophical and literary

letters, and to read and write. Generally in those times teaching was in the hands of a member of the family and there were people who were supposed to do it in the countryside, conveying the 'illumination' offered by reading. In that abandoned and depressed world, there were however cultivated people. (...) My mother's father, whom I did not know, was one of these people: a cultured man, without any doubt. I still have some books that I inherited from him, such as the *Method for Guitar* by Ferdinando Carulli and Dante's Divine Comedy. When I was a child I used to say Dante's lines of the Divine Comedy (...). The latter sustained me and fulfilled my immense need for education and culture." M. Socorro, *cit.*, from www.aliriodiaz.net.

¹² "A childish thing, hand-written in italics. I was moved by a great desire for knowledge, for discovering what had happened in my country until the present moment when I was writing". M. Socorro, *ibid.*

¹³ "I was interested in everything, I learnt by heart the topics that most interested me or I diligently copied them on loose sheets or small copy books. I remember memorizing philosophical concepts from Socrates, Seneca, Ovidius, Plato, Descartes (...)". A. Díaz, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

subjects – let us not forget how, during his lessons, he still likes making frequent mention of literary passages and poems – seems at that time to find a hindrance, an obstacle in the difficult conditions of those times. It seemed as if the aspirations of Díaz as a young man were prevented from finding a means of realization, were doomed at the outset:

Pero en mi niñez se producían también los grandes altibajos propios de la geografía de la vida humana. Si en muchos aspectos la mía alcanzaba matices de una ventura afortunada, en otros el panorama no podía contener más martirios tanto por su privaciones materiales como por la pretensión de mis aspiraciones imposibles. Así me tocó soportar uno de los más difíciles períodos de penurias en la vida de mi familia;¹⁴

And then a few lines later:

desde luego que el mayor infortunio en esta situación estaba en la inevitable calidad de esclavos en que vivíamos, condenados como estábamos a ejecutar los más disímiles trabajos del campo (...): hacer mandados era lo primero que se le imponía al niño (...). Los trabajos en los conucos consistían principalmente en la siembra de maíz, paja (...).¹⁵

The work grew still harder and more dramatic, in the eyes of young people, when errands were required - the children's "prime task":

Viajes sempre a pie con encomiendas a Carora, Careche, La Sibucara, Muñoz, El Zamuro, El Susucal, Los Novillos y Playa Elena. De estos viajes considerábamos como el más atroz el de Carora; sesenta kilómetros de ida y vuelta, a pie con un burro por delante (...).¹⁶

¹⁴ "But when I was young I experienced many ups and downs typical of the landscape of human life. If, from many points of view, my life was characterized by good fortune, in the view of other people this landscape could not have held greater obstacles, both due to its material deprivation and the demands of my impossible aspirations. I had to experience a most difficult period of poverty in my family's life". A. Díaz, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ "Obviously the worst of this situation was that it was inevitable in that situation of slavery, since we were condemned to carry out much farm labor (...): carrying out such tasks was the first thing imposed on the child (...). The main labor in the fields in those times was the sowing of maize and hay (...). *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "One always went on foot to undertake errands in Carora, Careche, La Sibucara, Muñoz, El Zamuro, El Susucal, Los Novillos and Playa Elena. The most dreadful of all these trips was the one to Carora; sixty kilometers for a round trip and a donkey walking ahead of us". A. Díaz, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Because of such poverty, then, the maestro's family was in a quagmire, as Díaz himself testified in his autobiography. Yet despite all such difficulties, the boy's sensitivity, with his strong positivity and interest, moved him towards knowledge and the detailed study of everything he came across with.

Another definitely noteworthy aspect relates to the moments of *fiesta* which at regular intervals mark the labors of the week and year in Venezuelan culture. It is interesting to point this aspect out because it forms the basis for the cultural wealth that Díaz considers to be his inheritance from those who contributed greatly to his musical identity, giving it those strong, enduring folk connotations that so characterize his personality. These *fiesta* moments are frequently and enthusiastically described in the maestro's accounts, embodying the best aspect of popular life at the time. Such shared festivities alleviate the toils of hard work and a harsh, miserable reality with the happiness of a strongly united people. At such moments, folkloristic and musical creativity came to expression as a fundamental trait of each person, an innately creative, vivacious nature, as Díaz described in an interview with an Italian journalist:¹⁷ "In my country we all played guitar by ear, to accompany songs and love serenades." The feast days are therefore most characteristic of, and interesting for our theme:

Luego de tan ásperas faenas semanales, los sábados o domingos la comunidad se daba, finalmente, a su tradicionales entretenimientos: juegos, cantos, bailes y buen cocuy para calentar los ánimos y enmascarar fatigas...¹⁸

Here is another account of this particular environment in a piece of writing by Guido Margaria:¹⁹

Given this culturally deprived environment, music becomes a spiritual force, a tangible and exciting help, the most genuine and vibrant expression of the Venezuelan people: feasts, dances, serenades... they all follow one another

¹⁷ F. Michelangeli, *L'ultimo romantico*, Interview with Alirio Díaz, in *Seicorde*, Nov.-Dec. 1993, pp. 7-13.

¹⁸ "After hard weekly tasks, the community usually devoted itself to its traditional entertainments on Saturday and Sunday: games, songs, dances and good drinks, to cheer us up and console us for the hard labor (...)." A. Díaz, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁹ G. Margaria, *Alirio Díaz, o dell'amicizia*, article accompanied by a recording by Alirio Díaz.

in the course of the year. Díaz has absorbed and assimilated all this since childhood, even though life seems devoid of perspectives other than laboring in the fields or rearing cattle. Despite the harshness of labor, the spirit is nourished through contact with nature and family, a true school of concord, infusing this extraordinarily sensitive young man with a slowly growing passion for music: his mother's great-grandfather, singer of country's *salves*, (...) his grandfather who played the violin and the guitar, his mother (...) who plays the guitar very well and, spontaneously and instinctively, sings sentimental songs: all these people are fine examples of that extraordinary phenomenon of music widespread amongst the Venezuelan people.

In fact, Venezuela at that time was strongly imbued with art, characterized by a sort of "cultural rebirth" of music. We must therefore, although only in summary, consider the musical life of this period, extending our perspective to all Venezuela.

3. A "REBIRTH" OF THE TRADITIONAL VENEZUELAN FOLKLORE HERITAGE

While it is true that the Venezuelan people are inclined to music, invariably expressed in a strong love of dancing and playing popular music, at a national level we are surprised to find a complex situation, in which music – especially the more "cultured" type in shows and theatres – has a difficult and fluctuating life, strongly influenced up to the 20th century by the political events that shook the country.

If we examine Venezuela's "official" musical life up to 1920, we discover a situation of great cultural poverty, with the exception of a few rare cultural events. This situation contrasts with the mostly spontaneous culture that marks rural, agricultural life – whose outward poverty is nevertheless "rich" in an artistic and musical sense.

The rigid dictatorship of General Gómez (who governed the country between 1908 and 1935, the period during which Díaz was born) was decisive in creating the sense of musical and cultural isolation apparent in the country in the 1920s. Apart from music and dances, and very rare lyric representations and popular dramas such as *zarzuelas*, we find a country almost deprived of musical activity. As Ramón y Rivera puts it, the society of those times considered music to be the "most disregarded