

Afterlight

Afterlight was commissioned by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) to commemorate Aaron Copland's Centennial in the year 2000. This work is an example of a rather abstract composition that is otherwise based on a very concrete experience. A few months ago, I was working on the music for Pascal Rioult's choreography "El Mozote"—a story about the killing of hundreds of innocent Salvadorians at the hands of militiamen, when I came across a text by Carlos Henríquez, titled *Luciérnagas en El Mozote* ("Fireflies at El Mozote"). The text described the arrival of Henríquez and other workers of "Radio Venceremos" to the site where the massacre had taken place three years earlier. As the men reached the outskirts of the desolate village, Henríquez writes that "...a dazzling spectacle made it clear to us that we had arrived at El Mozote: thousands of little lights began to twinkle. The intermittent dance of the fireflies illuminated the night, showing us the way to the town's ruined church. 'They are the souls of El Mozote!,' said Padre Rogelio Poncel."

I was fascinated by the fact that the "dance of the fireflies" described above stayed on my mind not as a visual or narrative representation of a brutal—albeit strangely poetic—event, but as a powerful—and strictly musical—"picture": The sound of brief rhythmic punctuations that weave a sparkling, constant, yet unpredictable flicker. Like the *trompe-l'oeils* found in the visual arts, the outcome is a shared expression of that which is regular (or "predictable") and of the ultimately chaotic.

The afterlights of my "luciérnagas" are represented by tangible musical materials: ascending and descending scale-like gestures that only seem regular, but that are actually under constant transformation. Similarly, the general rhythmicity of the piece is marked by the use of *ostinati*, whose regularity is perpetually disturbed by the incisive action of various surface elements, such as displaced accents, dynamic interjections, and the juxtaposition of extreme registers: The highly organized but endlessly puzzling world of insect life.

The concert by Gil Rose and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project on Saturday morning was sensational; a member of a panel afterward said it may have been the best single concert he had ever heard. There were three terrific pieces...Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez' "Afterlight" had its world premiere. This is complex and compelling music by a very gifted composer, both angry and mournful, and with the most amazing acoustical effects (aural afterlights) composed into it.

Richard Dyer, The Boston Globe