

Mano a mano (I, II, III, IV, V)

For solo piano (1997-2007)

With *Mano a Mano*, a long-postponed desire of mine is finally realized: to write for a long-beloved instrument that nonetheless greatly intimidates me. A commission from Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes got me started. I decided to call my good friend Alberto Cruzprietio and ask him whether he would be interested in performing a collection of demanding solo piano compositions. He stoically accepted, I wrote a four-minute piece of monstrous difficulty (*Mano a mano II*), and Alberto premiered it at the Festival del Centro Histórico of Mexico City. Other projects got in the way of writing further pieces, and it was not until another dear friend and great pianist, Sara Laimon, approached me that I managed to produce two more works in this ongoing series. *Mano a Mano IV* (*Ariles de Camapanario*) and *V* (*Genghis?*) were written in 2005 and 2007 for Cristina Valdes, also a great virtuosa who resides in Seattle.

Mano a mano I-III are indeed virtuosic, intense, and extremely demanding miniatures. *Mano a mano IV* is even shorter and more subdued, but with a more meditative quality and expansive sonority than the other three works in the collection. All of these pieces explore some aspect of Mexican folk music. They are perhaps as close as I have ever gotten to writing "folklorist" music and yet all consist of rather abstract--almost deterministic—musical processes. *M. a M. I* is an exercise in contrapuntal layering, where a relatively simple rhythmic cell is developed through the addition of new voices of distinct character until the musical texture reaches a sort of "boiling point" and disintegrates. *M. a M. II* originates in a simple melodic/harmonic idea. A cantus firmus redolent of the bass line of a Mexican "Son Jarocho" is exposed, transformed, and distorted throughout the work in a series of episodes that grow in rhythmic complexity, eventually creating a dance of indomitable frenzy. *M. a M. III* is the most overtly "folkloric" in the series. It uses an arpeggiated diatonic motif that is gradually "corrupted" when subjected to a series of transpositions—tonal and rhythmic--that eventually render it unrecognizable. The commercial "bastardization" of so-called "world music" comes to mind as a viable metaphor. *M. a M. IV* bears the subtitle "*Ariles de Campanario*" which I borrowed from a beautiful song by Jarocho songwriter David Haro. It evokes the depth and intensity of some Mexican church bells, and constitutes an exploration of various kinds of harmonic fifths. *Genghis (M.a M. V)* is a wobbly, six-legged robot built in 1989 by Rodney Brooks (Director of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab) which, upon being switched on, doesn't vacuum one's floors or builds the newest Chevrolet. Instead, it simply "does what is in its nature."

The mythical Mexico that inspires most of these pieces is quite possibly gone forever, so nostalgia is perhaps the strongest motivating force behind their composition...

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