An Introduction to the Life and Work of Javier Alvarez

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DEDICATION

To Silvana Batllori.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to become the first scholarly research document devoted to the life and work of Mexican postmodern composer Javier Alvarez. It contains the most detailed and up-to-date account of the composer's biography and compositional style, along with a brief analysis of *Metal of Hearts* (*Metal de corazones*) one of his most recent works. The information presented is based on hundreds of primary source documents, an interview with the composer conducted over the course of three days, and academic sources only available in Spanish.

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Introduction

Scholars agree that Javier Alvarez (b. 1956) is one of the leading Mexican composers born in the second half of the twentieth century.[1] However, research on Alvarez's work is often limited to his early electroacoustic pieces, and the little that has been written about his life has not always been accurate. To date, there has been no book or thesis devoted to Alvarez. This document aims to help fill that void by providing a more ample consideration of Alvarez's life and work than exists at present.

This project will be divided into biographical and analytical sections. The biographical sketch will draw on various sources, including interviews, letters, legal documents, school records, newspaper articles, recordings, and so forth.

The analytical portion will be divided into two sections: the first will briefly discuss Alvarez's compositional periods; the second will offer a concise analysis of Alvarez's *Metal of Hearts* (*Metal de corazones*). The former will show Alvarez's evolution as a composer, while the later will shed light on how Alvarez's different traits converge in his later years. Since the main objective of this document is to gain a better understanding of Alvarez's life and work, the biographical section will be more detailed and longer than the analytical one.

[1] In Spanish, the last name Alvarez is written with an accent on the first letter (as in Álvarez). Early in his career, Javier Alvarez decided to use the English spelling of his last name.

Biography

Childhood and Early Education

Javier Alvarez Fuentes was born to a well-to-do family in Mexico City the morning of May 8, 1956.[2] His father, Augusto H. Álvarez Garcia (1914-1995), was a famous modernist architect who championed the ideas of Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and the International Style in Mexico. Augusto's most iconic work is the Torre Latino Americana, a modernist skyscraper that, on completion, was Latin America's tallest building.[3] Alvarez's mother, Delfina Fuentes Ogarrio (1926-2000), was an English teacher. Alvarez's parents were music lovers and enjoyed dancing to Afro-Cuban music.[4]

In the Alvarez household, the arts and creativity were encouraged. As part of their basic education, Alvarez's and his older brothers—Augusto (1947-2020), Manuel (b. 1948), and Jorge (b. 1952)—studied languages, science, and dance. Javier learned English during elementary school and French during high school. In addition, he developed an interest in origami, entomology, photography, and music.[5]

Several of Alvarez's childhood anecdotes exemplify his curiosity about music and sound. Perhaps the most relevant is when his parents purchased a tape recorder from Japan. The purpose of the device was to make backup copies of an extensive collection of Afro-Cuban music on Bakelite 78 rpm recordings. Eventually, this recorder would

[2] Mexico City Civil Registry, Javier Alvarez Fuentes Birth Certificate, No. 950975, reissued in September 1975. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[3] Kathryn O'Rourke, "Augusto H. Álvarez," in *Grove Art Online*, accessed March 2, 2020, https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart.
[4] Javier Alvarez, interview by Alejandro Basulto, November 29, 2019, March 12, 2020, and March 14, 2020.
[5] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.

become what Alvarez calls his "first musical instrument."[6] The device was capable of recording on two separate tracks, which allowed Alvarez to experiment with overdubbing and other sound manipulation techniques. Alvarez would later compose several electronic and electroacoustic pieces in which these techniques are crucial elements.

Attending the concerts of Mexico's National Symphony Orchestra also impressed the young Javier. At one of those concerts, he heard Claude Debussy's *The Sea* (*La mer*) and was deeply moved by the lush orchestration, especially the sound of the clarinet.[7] A few years later, he started his formal education as a clarinet major in Mexico's National Conservatory.

Prior to college, Alvarez attended prestigious private schools where he excelled in a demanding curriculum that emphasized languages, art, and music. From 1962 to 1969, he attended elementary school at the Modern American School (Escuela Moderna Americana), a secular institution in which courses were taught in both Spanish and English, and arts were an essential part of the curriculum.[8] Later, Alvarez completed middle school at the Homeland Institute (Instituto Patria), an exclusive all-male school founded by the Jesuits in 1938. The Homeland Institute was the school of choice for many well-to-do Mexican families; in its classrooms were educated many future leading politicians, influential businessmen (including some of the richest men in modern Mexico), and prominent intellectuals. However, in 1971, the leadership of the school decided to gradually close the institute because the highly privileged student body did not

[6] Alvarez, interview by Basulto. ("Mi primer instrumento musical.") All translations from Spanish are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.
[7] Javier Alvarez, interview by Guillermo Gavira and Mauricio Peña, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjq54m0jI7c&t=1385s.
[8] "About, Modern American School," Modern American School, accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.modernamerican.edu.mx/acerca_de_mas; Secretariat of Public Education, Javier Alvarez Fuentes Elementary School Diploma, No. 30866, issue on July 31, 1969. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

reflect the values of the Society of Jesus.[9] Nonetheless, Alvarez was able to finish middle school there in 1972. During the three years Alvarez attended the Homeland Institute, he excelled in a demanding curriculum that included, among other classes, music.[10]

Alvarez attended high school at the French-Mexican Technological Institute (Liceo Franco Mexicano), a secular institution that taught most of its courses in French. In July 1973, Alvarez's parents sent him to a one-month intensive French course in Touraine, France. During that trip, Alvarez spent all the money that his parents had allocated for the trip to buy his first clarinet.[11]

On his return to Mexico, Alvarez's parents hired Francisco Javier Garduño (b. 1944), the principal clarinetist of the Philharmonic Orchestra of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Orquesta Filarmónica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, OFUNAM), to teach Alvarez.[12] In 1974, at eighteen years of age, and one year after starting his lessons, Alvarez was admitted to Mexico's National Conservatory, where he became Garduño's regular student.

As a high school student, Alvarez met Jean Louis Carlotti (b. 1956), who helped him develop his love for jazz, poetry, and popular music. Carlotti was a French émigré who taught Alvarez the rudiments of classical guitar playing and introduced him to jazz artists like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Archie Shepp. Shortly after becoming friends, Alvarez and Carlotti began playing jazz standards as well as free improvisations

[9] "Cerrada hace 28 años, la institución jesuita formó a destacados personajes de la vida pública del país," *Revista Proceso*, editorial, July 24, 1999, accessed April 7, 2020. https://www.proceso.com.mx/181099/cerrada-hace-28-anos-la-institucion-jesuita-formo-a-destacados-personajes-de-la-vida-publica-del-pais.
[10] National Autonomus University of Mexico, Homeland Institute, Javier Alvarez Fuentes Academic Transcript, Folio No. 70013182, issued in August 1971. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[11] Lawrence B. Johnson, "A Star Has Been Born, and City Plays a Big Role," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 7, 1982.
[12] Institut Technologique Franco-Mexicain, Javier Alvarez Fuentes Academic Transcript, undated. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

over simple chord progressions. Alvarez, who also played the *jarana* (a traditional Mexican instrument), in turn introduced Carlotti to different types of Mexican folk music and European twentieth-century composers, like Witold Lutoslawski and Karlheinz Stockhausen. They also shared a love for French and Latin American poetry, including the works of Stéphane Mallarmé, Pablo Neruda, and Homero Aridjis.[13] In part because of this relationship, jazz, free improvisation, and poetry became influences in Alvarez's work.

Music Education in Mexico

During his years as a student at the National Conservatory (1974-1980), Alvarez had the opportunity to study numerous topics, including clarinet, composition, music history, ear training, and harmony. He sang in the conservatory's choir starting in 1975, and the year after, began playing clarinet in the school's orchestra. During his last year in the conservatory, Alvarez also took several courses in chamber music.[14] Shortly after enrolling in the National Conservatory, Alvarez began studying composition with Mario Lavista (b. 1943). Thirteen years Alvarez's senior, Lavista belonged to a generation of Mexican composers who embraced cosmopolitanism, rejected nationalism, and were influenced by European high modernism and American experimental music.[15] Although Alvarez showed little interest in serial music, other trends of European high modernism—such as new instrumental techniques and free atonality—and the influence of American experimentalism had an enduring impact on his developing musicianship.

[13] Jean Louis Carlotti, telephone interview by Alejandro Basulto, April 22, 2020.
[14] Mexican National Conservatory, Javier Alvarez Fuentes Academic Transcript, Exp. 14409, issued on July 7, 1980. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[15] Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, "Forging a Cosmopolitan Ideal: Mario Lavista's Early Music," *Latin American Music Review* 35, No. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2014): 170-75.

While a student of the National Conservatory, Alvarez became a member of the Composition and Research Group (Grupo de Composición e Investigación), which was one of Mexico's most respected forums in which to learn about new music. When Alvarez was a member, Lavista and Daniel Catán (1949-2011) led the group. Founded by Carlos Chávez (1899-1978), the group was devoted to teaching students to compose their own works and analyze traditional and contemporary scores. Besides composing and researching, members of the group regularly performed each other's works. Among Alvarez's classmates at the group were the conductor Eduardo Diazmuñoz (b. 1953), and the composers Bernardo Feldman (b. 1955) and Hilda Paredes (b.1957).[16]

In addition to his studies at the National Conservatory, Alvarez performed as a clarinetist in local venues. On March 16, 1978, Alvarez and Lavista performed Alban Berg's Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 5 (1913), in the Hall of the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Museum.[17] This concert, entirely composed by twentieth-century works, proved one of Alvarez's most important experiences during his student years. Alvarez believes that this might have been the Mexican premiere of Berg's work.[18] On August 2, 1980, Alvarez played in the premiere of Daniel Catán's first opera, *Encounter in the Sunset* (*Encuentro en el ocaso*).[19] In an undated letter, Catán thanked Alvarez for playing in his opera and offered him a modest amount of store credit in a recording store as a token of his appreciation.[20]

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[16] Mario Lavista, "Grupo de composición e investigación del conservatorio nacional de música," *La gaceta del conservatorio nacional de música* 1, (June 1978): 7. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[17] Alban Berg, Four Pieces, Op. 5, program, Javier Alvarez, clarinet, Mario Lavista, piano, University Museum Hall, March 16, 1978, Mexico City, Mexico. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[18] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[19] Daniel Catán, *Encuentro en el ocaso*, Camerata Nueva España, Francisco Nuñez, conductor, Mexico City Hall, August 2, 1980, Concert Program. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[20] Daniel Catán, letter to Javier Alvarez, undated. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

Furthermore, Alvarez took several extra courses in the recently created Life and Movement School (Escuela de Perfeccionamiento Vida y Movimiento) with visiting guest artists. In the summers of 1979 and 1980, he took courses in clarinet with Karl Leister (b. 1937), principal clarinetist of the Berlin Philharmonic, and in chamber music with Manuel Enríquez (1926-1994), one of Mexico's most renowned composers.[21]

In 1979, one year before graduating from the National Conservatory, Alvarez won the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Composition Award for his cantata *Love is More Labyrinths* (*Amor es mas laberintos*) for five soloist singers, choir, and orchestra, which helped bolster his reputation as a promising young composer. The Mexican Society of Authors and Composers (Sociedad de Autores y Compositores de México, SACM) organized the competition and arranged for a performance of Alvarez's winning work. The Mexico State Philharmonic Orchestra (Orquesta Filarmónica del Estado de México, OFEM), under the baton of Javier Gonzalez, premiered *Love is More Labyrinths* on November 22, 1979, in Toluca's Cathedral. The soloists were the sopranos Guadalupe Pérez Arias and Victoria Zúñiga, the alto Margarita Gonzalez, the tenor Fernando Mejía, and the baritone David Ivker.[22] Alvarez, assisted by his long-time friend, the conductor Eduardo Diazmuñoz, had the responsibility of preparing the soloists. According to Alvarez, this experience cemented his ambition to become a composer. [23]

In 1980, Alvarez married Pilar Gadea Lacasa, a fellow student at the National Conservatory. Gadea Lacasa began her studies as a piano major but eventually pursued a career as a cellist after an accident prevented her from continuing playing the piano.

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[21] Consuelo Luna, letter to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 7, 1980. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[22] Javier Alvarez, *Amor es mas laberintos,* program, Mexico State Symphony Orchestra, Javier Gonzalez, conductor, November 22, 1979, Toluca Cathedral, Mexico State. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[23] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.

Early on in her career as a cellist Gadea Lacasa focused on performing with orchestras and new music ensembles, and in more recent years she has developed a program devoted to teaching string instruments to young musicians. Alvarez and Gadea separated around 1984, and divorced in 1990.[24]

Musical Education in the United States

In September of 1980, Alvarez moved to Milwaukee to pursue a master's degree in composition at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). In order to get the financial resources to pay for his studies at UWM, Alvarez requested, and was awarded, an annual stipend of $8,644 ($26,804 in current currency) from the National Fund for the Social Activities (Fondo Nacional para Actividades Sociales, FONAPAS), Mexico's governmental agency devoted to supporting artists at that time.[25] While at UWM, he studied composition with John Downey (1927-2004), whom he met at a music festival in San Miguel de Allende the year before.[26]

Downey was a composer of orchestral, chamber, vocal, and electronic music. While twentieth-century French composers, like Olivier Messiaen and Darius Milhaud, heavily influenced his musical taste, his overall compositional style was extremely eclectic. On the one hand, he used modified serial techniques, and "motivic development, sometimes polyphonically layered, in conjunction with timbral identities or timbral mixtures."[27] On the other hand, in his orchestral composition *Jingalodeon,* he used functional harmony, and elements of jazz and popular music, even quoting the popular

[24] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[25] Javier Alvarez, letter to the FONAPAS, July 14, 1980. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[26] Johnson, "A Star Has Been Born."
[27] Richard Swift revised by Anders Tobiason, "John Downey," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed February 2, 2020, http://www.grovemusic.com.

Christmas songs, “Jingle Bells.” Alvarez was strongly influenced by Downey’s ideas, and his own eclecticism would become more pronounced after studying with him. In addition, Downey’s thoughts on texture, rhythm, and motion—which culminated into something that he called “psycho-rhythmics”—foreshadowed Alvarez’s doctoral dissertation.[28]

During the duration of his studies at UWM, Alvarez excelled in academics, actively performed as a clarinetist, and took advantage of the school’s electronic studio. Despite being a composition major, several of Alvarez’s courses were performance oriented, which allow him to play with the UWM orchestra and the graduate woodwind quintet.[29] For the second year of the program, Alvarez was awarded a non-resident tuition remission scholarship. As part of this scholarship, he had to work as a Graduate Project Assistant to Yehuda Yannay (b. 1937), the director of Music from Almost Yesterday, the university’s new music ensemble.[30] In addition, Alvarez briefly became a clarinetist of the Milwaukee Ballet Orchestra.[31] UWM had an electronic music studio that was not being used at the time; Alvarez was allowed to experiment with the recording equipment and synthesizers, which further piqued his curiosity about electronic music.[32]

Outside his school duties, Alvarez attended summer courses and took part in composition competitions. In the summer of 1981, Alvarez attended the Aspen Music School where he took lessons with clarinetist Richard Waller (b. 1929) and composer Charles Jones (1910-1997).[33] In 1982, during his last semester at UWM, Alvarez won the Lan Adomian composition competition with *Three Frogs Time Trial* (*Tres ranas contra*

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[28] John Downey, “Texture as Psycho-Rhythm,” *Perspectives of New Music* 20, No. 1/2 (Autumn, 1981 – Summer, 1982): 640-48.
[29] The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Javier Alvarez Fuentes, Gradute Record, Student Number 000-12-0139, issued on July 12, 1982. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[30] Emmanuel Rubin, letter to Javier Alvarez, May 26, 1981. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[31] Gerard Mackenna, letter to whom it may concern, May 19, 1982. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[32] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[33] Gordon Hardy, letter to Javier Alvarez, May 26, 1981. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

reloj) (1981) for soprano, violin, cello, and piano. Alvarez's former teacher Daniel Catán won second prize.[34]

Shortly before leaving Milwaukee, Alvarez caught the attention of Lawrence B. Johnson, a local music critic. In March of 1982, Johnson published an article describing Alvarez's *Ayara* for bassoon and string quartet as "the most significant new music by a young composer to reach the writer's ears in a long time."[35] On May 7, 1982, Johnson also published a longer article in which Alvarez expressed his dislike for the dryness of serial music and stated that it is possible to "use all kinds of elements as long as there is a discourse and everything is organically tied."[36] In August 1982, Johnson further discussed Alvarez's *Ayara* in the journal *Musical America*. For Johnson, Alvarez's principal influences at the time were Carlos Chávez, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Igor Stravinsky.[37]

Musical Education in the United Kingdom

In the summer of 1982, Alvarez moved to London to pursue a Graduate Diploma in composition at the Royal College of Music (RCM) under the tutelage of English composer John Lambert (1926-1995). Lambert, who was known for encouraging his students to develop their own voices, taught many important and diverse English composers of the second half of the twentieth century, including Oliver Knussen (1952-

[34] Sergio Cardona Guzmán, "El premio Lan Adomian lo ganó Javier Alvarez," *Novedades*, June 6, 1982.
[35] Lawrence B. Johnson, "Stunning Young Talent Flashes Into View," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 17, 1982.
[36] Johnson, "A Star Has Been Born."
[37] Lawrence B. Johnson, "Wisconsin Contemporary Music Forum: Alvarez's 'Ayara,'" *Musical America* 32 (August 1982): 25.

2018) and Mark-Anthony Turnage (b. 1960).[38] The RCM's postgraduate course in composition invited Alvarez to be a part of the RCM composer's group, to have his music performed by the school's different ensembles, and to have a second area of study in the electronics department.[39]

Since studying at the RCM was expensive—the conservatory calculated that living and tuition expenses could amount to more than £6,100 (roughly $30,000 in current currency)—Alvarez had to request funding from several institutions.[40] With the assistance of his older brother Augusto, Alvarez managed to convince OFUNAM to commission him to compose a large orchestral work. In return, the orchestra agreed to cover his tuition at the RCM.[41] The piece that resulted from this commission was *Trireme* (1982), a concerto for French horn and orchestra. On October 22, 1982, the hornist John Havu, dedicatee of the work, accompanied by the OFUNAM, performed the premiere of the piece at the Nezahualcóyotl Concert Hall. On the podium was Alvarez's friend, Eduardo Diazmuñoz.

Trireme was well received. Juan Arturo Brennan, one of Mexico's most respected critics, considered the piece the most interesting work of the program.[42] Mexican music critic José Rafael Calva, while he was not convinced by the structure of the piece, wrote:

[38] Stephen Pettitt, "Lambert, John," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed February 2, 2020, http://www.grovemusic.com.
[39] A. W. Abbot, assistant Registrar of the Royal College of Music, letter to Javier Alvarez, February 1, 1982. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[40] Abbot, letter to Alvarez.
[41] Javier Alvarez, letter to Alfonso de María y Campos, June 30, 1982. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[42] Juan Arturo Brennan, "Teorema de concierto," *Uno Más Uno*, October 25, 1982.

"*Trireme* is intense music, profound, well-thought, that shows a young composer with musical imagination, that understands music as ideas and *pathos* [italics in original]."[43]

During his early years in London, Alvarez continued to struggle to get financial assistance to support the cost of his education. In 1982, the composer won the Performing Rights Society's Sir Arthur Bliss Memorial Scholarship in composition. The award covered a year of postgraduate education in composition, which allowed Alvarez to study one more year at the RCM.[44] The same year, Alvarez also received assistance from the Mexican branch of the British Council. In April 1984, when the support of the British Council was coming to an end, Alvarez sent a letter to John Chapman, the head of the organization, to request further financial aid. In this letter, Alvarez reveals his views on the importance of electronic music:

> Since my arrival at the Royal College of Music on September 1982, I have been involved in numerous composition projects. Parallel to my instrumental composing, my interest has also been drawn towards electronic music composition. Needless to say, this is an area of music to which I was never exposed to in Mexico, where the facilities available are practically inexistant [*sic*]. Yet, this field has rapidly grown in Europe, and more so, perhaps, in Great Britain. It has been through concerts and hours of hard work at the RCM electronic studio that I have become fully aware, not only of the potential of electronic music, but also of my lakcs [*sic*] as a composer in this area, and this concerns me very much. It is widely acknowledged that electronic music technique forms [are] part of the technique of composers of today, just as much as counterpoint or harmony and orchestration are. It is undeniable that a new breed of composers is emerging all around the world, young people of our time, who are shortening the gap between "standard" techniques and new technology, with an astonishing impact on the present developments of musical thought, performance, notation, musical education, music therapy, just to mention a few instances. It is at this point where I would like to stress that a further year of training in this area would give me the opportunity to

[43] Jose Rafael Calva, "Indigestión sinfónica: Javier Alvarez promesa musical," *Uno más uno*, November 13, 1982 ("*Trireme* es música intensa, profunda, bien pensada, que muestra a un joven compositor con imaginación musical y que entiende la música como pensamiento y *pathos*").
[44] "Prizes: Bliss Award and Prize Winners," The Bliss Trust, Accessed on March 31, 2020, http://www.blisstrust.org/index.php#.

> acquire an acceptable level of technical knowledge, and would enable me to cope with the likely needs of a composer in the last quarter of the twentieth century. [45]

Even today, Alvarez strongly believes that technology should be an essential part of the education of a composer. His music changed dramatically after working with technology, and he became one of Mexico's pioneers in the use of electronic resources to compose both acoustic and electronic music. Furthermore, when Alvarez became the head of several higher education institutions and music festivals in Mexico, he resolved to teach more classes and give more concerts involving music technology.

In the summer of 1983, Alvarez attended the prestigious International Dance Course for Professional Choreographers and Composers at the University of Surrey. Established in 1975, this yearly summer course matched early-career choreographers and dancers with composers. The intention was to search for new voices who would appeal to a broader audience. The course was extremely intensive and solely devoted to experimentation without the stress of public performances or internal competition. The year Alvarez attended, the mentors were the choreographer Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993) and the composer David Gregory. Technology played a crucial role in all the composers' processes, since they were asked to create electronic music. Composers were provided with top-notch audio equipment, and had at their disposal musicians as well as audio engineers, who helped in the creation of the tape part of the music. [46] While Alvarez had shown interest in electronic music in the past, this is the first known instance of an actual Alvarez work for electronics.

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[45] Javier Alvarez, letter to John Chapman, British Council, April 5, 1984. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[46] Annette Massie, comp., *Dance in Time: International Dance Course for Professional Choreographers and Composers 1975-1983* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1983), 1-14.

Shortly after the University of Surrey's course, Alvarez started to work professionally as a composer for dance. In October 1984, the Limbs Dance Company, from New Zealand, presented in New York and Washington a dance called *Pinprick,* with music by Alvarez.[47] In 1990, the Cervantino Festival in Mexico commissioned Michael Mao's dance *Canción*, also to music by Alvarez.[48] However, it was Alvarez's work with English choreographer Sue MacLennan that allowed him to compose his most ambitious pieces for the medium.

MacLennan was the leader of the Occasional Dance Company, and she would become one of Alvarez's closest artistic partners for the next few years. They first collaborated in January 1985, when Alvarez wrote an electronic piece to accompany MacLennan and Matthew Hauxwell's dance *Seven Desperate Years.*[49] In 1989, MacLennan presented *Appearances,* with music by Alvarez. A forty-minute long tape piece, *Appearances* is perhaps Alvarez's most ambitious composition for dance. The work, which evokes Afro-Caribbean rhythms, got extensive press coverage and the reviews were mixed. On the one hand, the *London Times* critic John Percival wrote, "Alvarez's music was too trivial: mindless rhythm and short-breathed phrases."[50] On the other hand, Keith Watson, writing for *Ham & High*, "when the Latin score by Javier Alvarez […] was at its most dynamically rhythmic, the choreography […] was a

[47] Alan M. Kriegsam, "Limbs Dance Company," *Washington Post,* October 17, 1984; Jack Anderson, "Dance: Troupe from New Zealand," *New York Times,* October 7, 1984.
[48] Veronica Flores Aguilar, "Dance Express and Dolores Pradera, the Best of the 18th Season of Festival Internacional Cervatino," [México, D.F.] *El Día*, October 26, 1990.
[49] Sue MacLennan, Matthew Hauxwell, and Javier Alvarez, *Seven Desperate Years,* program, Dance Umbrella 1984: Sixth International Contemporary Dance Festival, November 11, 1984, Riverside Studios, London, England. Privately held by Javier Alvarez
[50] Jon Percival, "Appearances: The Place," *London Times*, March 24, 1989.

fidgeting forest of invention, the branch line of the movement held together by the power of the music."[51]

In the spring of 1984, while studying at the RCM, Alvarez composed what would eventually become his signature work: *Temazcal* for maracas and tape. Alvarez decided to write the piece for maracas because one of his peers at RCM, the Venezuelan flutist Luis Julio Toro, happened to be an expert maracas player. Toro would eventually become the dedicatee of the work and one of its early champions. For the tape part, Alvarez decided to use a field recording of a traditional Mexican son called "The Little Lemon" ("El limoncito"), which was collected by Mexican-American ethnomusicologist Raul Hellmer (1913-1971). Alvarez originally planned to present the recording exclusively as the final section of the piece. However, following the advice of Australian television composer Barrington Pheloung (1954-2019), Alvarez transformed and disguised Hellmer's recording, using pitch shifters and looping snipets of the recording, in order to embed it into the very beginning of the composition. Alvarez generated the rest of the tape material by recording several hours of Toro improvising on the maracas and then manipulating the recording. Alvarez envisioned a piece that would juxtapose a "primeval instrument against a complex electroacoustic soundscape."[52]

Temazcal premiered on May 22, 1984, at the Southlands College, Athlone Hall, in a concert hosted by the RCM Electronic Studio. In the premiere's program notes, Alvarez explains, "the 'live maracas' material is derived from rhythmic patterns found in most Latin American folk music, which the player freely combines, 'constructing' larger

[51] Keith Watson, "Latin Roots: Sue MacLennan's Occasional Dance Company," *Ham & High*, April, 1989. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[52] Javier Alvarez, "*Temazcal*: 35 Years On," Javier Alvarez's personal archive, unpublished essay, 2019. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

rhythmic structures."[53] Soon after its premiere, the piece became popular and began to get performances in many European countries, like France, Germany, Norway, and Spain, among others.

From 1984 to 1993, Alvarez pursued a Ph.D. in electronic music composition at London's City University, funded through a Robert Kitchin (Saddlers) Research Scholarship.[54] His advisor, the English composer Simon Emmerson (b. 1950), had helped develop City University's electronic studio and was one the founding members of the Electro-Acoustic Music Association of Great Britain (later renamed Sonic Arts Networks). Most of Emmerson's compositions blended electronic sounds with acoustic instruments.[55] Not surprisingly, Alvarez focused on writing music for the same medium as that of his advisor.

Alvarez was not the only Latin American composer pursuing a Ph.D. at City University; Alejandro Viñao (b. 1951) from Argentina, and Julio D'Escrivan (b. 1960) from Venezuela, were also students supervised by Emmerson during the 1980s. Emmerson recalls that the work of these three composers "became in many ways a critique of the relationship of pulse (and rhythm) to modernism in general, and within electroacoustic music in particular."[56] Emmerson recalled that Alvarez, D'Escrivan, and Viñao tried to create electronic music that shared many similarities with its acoustic counterpart. This was unlike the more familiar European practice, in which the acoustic

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[53] Javier Alvarez, *Temazcal,* program, Luis Toro, maracas, May 22, 1984, Athlone Hall, Southlands College, University of Roehampton. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[54] Dr. A.H. Seville, academic registrar, letter to Javier Alvarez, October 26, 1984. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[55] Stephen Montague, "Emmerson, Simon," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed on May 11, 2020, http://www.grovemusic.com.
[56] Simon Emmerson, "Pulse, Metre, Rhythm in Electro-Acoustic Music," (lecture, Eight Electroacoustic Music Studies Network International Conference at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, France, June 3-7, 2008) 1, accessed on Sep 25, 2020, http://www.ems-network.org/ems08/papers/emmerson.pdf.

music tried to mimic electronics. According to Emmerson, several of Alvarez's works "play overtly with the interaction of the truly live with the 'live' as recorded."[57] In other words, in Alvarez's electro-acoustic music, the tape blends to such a degree with the acoustic part that, at times, it is impossible for the listener to differentiate one from the other. Furthermore, Emmerson recalls that Alvarez, D'Escrivan, and Viñao were proud of their Latin American heritage and "embraced with the strong influence of their particular Latin American traditions."[58]

Alvarez's Ph.D. dissertation, "Compositional Strategies in Music for Solo Instruments and Electroacoustic Sounds," published in 1993, is a vital document to understand his approach to composition. On the one hand, Alvarez argues that traditional concert music is dominated by the "supremacy given to the music score."[59] On the other hand, the composer acknowledges that the electroacoustic studio environment is prone to create different results than traditional compositional methods, since "the composer is dealing directly with sonic raw material."[60] For example, Alvarez recognizes that music technology has enabled composers to deal with timbre in new ways. Yet, he argues that little consideration has been given to the temporal aspects of electronic music, especially rhythms that cannot be notated in a traditional score. The composer explains that despite the complexity of such rhythms, which may be impossible for humans to perform, they

[57] Simon Emmerson, "Personal, Local, Universal—Where Are We?" (lecture, Ninth Electroacoustic Music Studies Network International Conference at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 22-25, 2009) 2, accessed on Sep 25, 2020, http://www.ems-network.org/ems09/papers/emmerson.pdf.
[58] Emmerson, "Pulse, Metre, and Rhythm," 1.
[59] Javier Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies in Music for Solo Instruments and Electronic Sounds" (Ph.D. diss., London City University, England, 1993), 4-5.
[60] Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies," 1-3.

are easy to understand. For Alvarez, the importance of his dissertation lies in exploring the potential of rhythm, motion, and time in electronic music.[61]

Early Professional Career in London

During the beginning of his professional career in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Alvarez won several prestigious awards. In 1988, he won the prestigious Gemini Fellowship for composers.[62] As part of the award, Alvarez was commissioned to write an orchestral piece—the only orchestral commission that he ever received from an English institution. *Grammar for Two* (*Gramática de dos*) (1991), which was performed by the RCM Orchestra and conducted by English twentieth-century music specialist Edwin Roxburgh, was the resulting composition. The piece was not received well by local critics and it was never performed again in the UK.[63]

In sharp contrast, Alvarez's efforts in electroacoustic music were praised and received with enthusiasm. He won three different distinctions in three different editions of the prestigious Prix Ars Electronica, all of them in the Computer Music category. In 1988 he won an honorable mention for his work *Papalotl* (1987), for piano and tape,[64] and in 1993 garnered the second prize for his *Mannam* (1990), for *kayagum* (a traditional Korean harp) and tape. Charles Amirkhanian, one of the jurors of the competition, described the work as a "haunting, meditative work in a modal Korean tuning, [which] incorporates both Asian and Latin sensibilities in a fascinating and unpredictable

[61] Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies," 9.
[62] Christopher James, ed., "The Gemini Fellowship." *Music and Musicians International* 37, No. 3 (November 1988): 6.
[63] Meiron Bowen, "Bainbridge Premiere," *The Guardian,* March 2, 1991.
[64] Hannes Leopoldseder ed., *Meisterwerke der Computerkunst* (Bremen: TMS Prix Ars Electronica, 1988) 172.

mélange."[65] Finally, in 1995, he was awarded another honorable mention for *Imaginary Skulls* (*Calacas imaginarias*) (1994) for choir and tape.[66] Although Alvarez never won the Golden Nica (the first prize of the competition), he was highly thought of among elite electroacoustic composers, including notables like Bernard Parmegiani (1927-2013), who won the Golden Nica in the 1993 edition.

Alvarez won four awards from the prestigious Bourges Experimental Music Festival in the mixed media category. In 1985, *Temazcal* (1984) was awarded an honorable mention. David Keane, in his report of the festival, described the work as "technically impressive [and] very much appreciated by the festival audience."[67] The next year, 1986, Alvarez won another honorable mention for *Luz Caterpillar* (1986) for piano and tape.[68] Finally, in 1987, Alvarez won the CIME award, the highest prize of the competition, for *Papalotl.* Keane, in his report of the 1987 festival, described *Papalotl* as "a vital rhythmic work […] strongly reminiscent of his earlier *Temazcal* for maracas and tape."[69]

Alvarez's next popular success, *Metro Chabacano* (1986), had an unusual origin, as it was intended as a Christmas gift for his parents and not as a work for public performance. Alvarez decided to write the composition after his parents attended a concert in which English pianist Philip Mead performed *Papalotl.* After the concert, Alvarez's parents mentioned to their son that the piece was too complex for them to

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[65] Hannes Leopoldseder ed., *The Prix Ars Electronica: International Compendium of the Computer Arts 1993,* (Linz: Veritas, 1993), 140.
[66] Hannes Leopoldseder and Christine Schöpf ed., *The Prix Ars Electronica: International Compendium of the Computer Arts 1995,* (Linz: Österreichischer Rundfunk, 1995), 187.
[67] David Keane, "The 1985 Bourges Festival: A Report," *Computer Music Journal* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 62.
[68] No Author, "Winners at Bourges, 1986," *Computer Music Journal* 11, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 4-6.
[69] David Keane, "The 1987 Bourges International Festival of Experimental Music," *Computer Music Journal* 12, No. 1 (Spring 1988): 68-69.

enjoy. Shortly after, Alvarez composed a simple piece of music, which he named S*ong of Land and Hope* (*Canción de tierra y esperanza*)*,* using a Yamaha QX1 sequencer. Alvarez's intention was to appeal to his parents' taste.[70] A few years later, the composer used a string quartet arrangement of the piece to accompany an art installation of Mexican sculptor Marcos Limenez. The art installation was located in a subway station called Metro Chabacano, one of Mexico City's busiest stations. The composer decided to retitle the piece after the train station. [71]

Although *Metro Chabacano* is chiefly known as a piece for string quartet or string orchestra, it is important to realize that the original version was conceived to some extent as an electronic piece, since it was originally composed using a sequencer. As such, Alvarez dealt with the capabilities and limitations of this new medium and it was later that he transcribed and arranged the piece from the original audio file—what he calls the "demo recording"—into traditional notation.[72] Furthermore, despite the fact that several critics have found a relationship between the music and the busy metro station in Mexico City, the original piece was intended as a Christmas gift and it had no relationship to Limenez's installation nor to the subway station from whence it takes its name. Unfortunately, the demo recording is lost and it is impossible to compare the differences between the original and later versions of the piece.

Throughout his career, Alvarez developed professional relationships with several well-known artists. One of his most important collaborations was with Oscar-winning Mexican director Guillermo del Toro (b. 1964). Alvarez scored del Toro's first film, *Cronos* (1993), which was widely acclaimed both in Mexico and abroad. For Mexican

[70] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[71] Javier Alvarez, *Metro Chabacano,* Score, 1985, Peer International Corporation, New York, 4.
[72] Alvarez, *Metro Chabacano*, 4.

critic and composer Eduardo Soto Millán, "Alvarez not only sticks to the dramatic situations of the characters, even more, sometimes it seems that it is the music that takes the lead in certain moments of the film."[73] Adrian S. Pardo of the *Los Angeles Times* described Alvarez's score as "filled with polkas, cumbias, and tangos."[74] *Cronos* was the big winner of the thirty-fifth award ceremony of the Mexican Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Science (Academia Mexicana de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas, AMACC). Although Alvarez was nominated for best soundtrack and best original song, he did not win either award.[75]

During the 1990s Alvarez enjoyed a professional relationship with John Adams (b. 1947). In 1993, Adams invited Alvarez to the Ojai Music Festival. In the festival's program notes, Adams wrote, "the music of Javier Alvarez reveals influences of popular cultures that go beyond the borders of our own time and place, and his work is representative of an immensely important trend in the arts."[76] On October 19, 1996, the London Sinfonietta, led by Adams, performed Alvarez's *Burn Your Boats* (*Quemar las naves*) (1988) for instrumental septet. The concert was part of a festival called American Independents, hosted at the Royal Festival Hall. *The Guardian* critic Andrew Clemens described the work as "a play on riffs and rhythms of Latin American dance music."[77]

Despite his success in Europe and the United States, Alvarez's music was not immediately well received in his native country. In a letter to Alvarez, dated October

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[73] Eduardo Soto Millán, "*Cronos,* con música de Javier Álvarez," *Uno más uno,* May 29, 1993. ("Alvarez no únicamente logra apegarse a las diferentes situaciones anímico-dramáticas de los personajes, sino incluso, a veces pareciera ser la música la que lleva de la mano a ciertos cuadros de la película.")
[74] Adriana S. Pardo, "Mexican Perspective to Horror Films," *Los Angeles Times,* April 19, 1994, accessed on September 23, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-04-19-ca-47828-story.html.
[75] "Ariel Awards (1993)," Film Affinity USA, accessed Feb 3, 2021, https://www.filmaffinity.com/es/awards.php?award_id=ariel&year=1993.
[76] John Adams, Ojai Music Festival, program notes, 11. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[77] Andrew Clements, "London Sinfonietta Adams Queen Elizabeth Hall" *The Guardian,* October 21, 1996.

1991, Luis Julio Toro explained to Alvarez the difficulties that the flutist faced trying to program Alvarez's music in Mexico:

> We are going to the Cervantino and I put as a condition that I have to play your music, otherwise I won't go…. I don't know what happens [,] but every time I tell them that my program includes *Temazcal…* they start with their non-sense [.] So I had to tell them that if don't play those pieces [,] I won't go.[78]

In a follow-up letter to Alvarez, Toro described his experience playing Alvarez's music in Mexico:

> There was something that caught my attention and worried me. It was a total rejection of whatever kind of modern music that is inspired by popular rhythm or music. They [the Mexican public] are obsessed with a 'forced seriousness,' to the point of being ridiculous.… You, like me, we are entirely perverted by the folkloric music of our countries, as well as by jazz… and whatever sounds good to us![79]

Although Mexican institutions had a hard time accepting Alvarez's electroacoustic works, both the Mexican public and critics responded with enthusiasm to Alvarez's *Temazcal*. Mexican critic Juan Arturo Brennan, praised *Temazcal* as a work that "challenges the lack or rhythm of [traditional] electronic music," and portrays the enthusiastic audience response to his work as something "only reserved for the plump *bel canto* divas."[80]

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[78] Luis Julio Toro, letter to Javier Alvarez, October 10, 1991. Privately held by Javier Alvarez. ("Vamos al Cervatino en el que como condición les puse que si no tocaba música tuya no iba… no se que pasa pero cada vez que digo que mi programa incluye *Temazcal*… empiezan con pendejadas así que tengo que decirles que si no las toco no voy.")

[79] Luis Julio Toro, letter to Javier Alvarez, undated (circa early 1990s). Privately held by Javier Alvarez. ("Hubo algo que llamo mi atención y me preocupa, y es un rechazo total a cualquier manifestación de música moderna que tenga algo que ver con ritmo o música popular. Están hundidos en una "seriedad a la fuerza" que termina siendo ridículo…. Tanto tú como yo estamos totalmente pervertidos por la música folklórica de cada uno de nuestros países, así como por el jazz y cualquier otra vaina que suene 'sabroso.'")

[80] Juan Arturo Brennan, "Electrónica subversiva," *La jornada,* May 4, 1986. ("rompió la noción de la arritmia de la música electrónica.") ("una reacción que por lo común se dedica solo a las rollizas divas del *bel canto.*")

During his years in London, Alvarez taught in many European institutions. In the UK, Alvarez worked at the University of Hertfordshire from 1989 to 2004. In a recommendation letter on Alvarez's behalf, Howard Burrell, professor of music at the University of Hertfordshire, explained that Alvarez "has been associated with this [University of Hertfordshire] Music Department in one capacity or another from 1989; as lecturer and now [the year 2000] as visiting professor."[81] In addition, Alvarez taught in other English institutions, including London's Morley College, where he gave courses devoted to electronic music.[82]

Outside the UK, Alvarez was visiting professor in arts at Sweden's Malmö College of Music from 1996 to 1998. Johannes Johansson recommended Alvarez for the job in a letter to the Lund University's Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Challenges. In his letter Johansson explains that Alvarez "has in different ways worked with the relations between his ethnic background and his work in the filed of contemporary music. Hi [*sic*] is able to leave an important contribution to the understanding of the composer's part in a multicultural society."[83] In 1998, Alvarez was appointed acting professor of composition in the same institution while Hans Gefor was on leave.[84]

In 1996, Alvarez married Daniela di Desidero, with whom he had two children. Di Desidero was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on November 17, 1966.[85] She moved

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[81] Howard Burrell, Professor of Music at the University of Hertfordshire, letter to Javier Alvarez, March 10, 2000. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[82] Elaine Andrews, archivist at the Morley College, email to Alejandro Basulto, May 14, 2020.
[83] Lena Arstam, Malmo College of Music, letter to Javier Alvarez, January 23, 1998. (In this letter Arstam translates the original letters that Johansson wrote per Alvarez's request). Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[84] Hakan Lundstrom and Christel Tosting, Malmo Academy of the Performing Arts, letter to Javier Alvarez, Janury 23, 1998. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[85] Buenos Aires Municipal Registrar, Daniela Fabiana Di Desidero, Birth Certificate, section 6-d, Issue IIC, Number 2004. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

to London in 1993 to pursue studies in English at the St. Giles International Language School and the Westminster College.[86] In 1994, she enrolled in a two-year graduate program in woodcarving and gilding at London's City and Guild Arts School.[87] Di Desidero has worked as a gilder, and more recently, as an art curator. Alvarez and Di Desidero were married on March 8, 1996, at the Islington town hall register office.[88] The couple also had a Catholic wedding on April 13, 1996, at the San Roque Chapel, in Buenos Aires.[89] The first son of the couple, Tobías Alvarez Di Desidero, was born in London, on December 2, 1996.[90] Their second child, Magali Alvarez Di Desidero, was born in London on November 26, 2000.[91]

Late Professional Career in Mexico

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Alvarez, then in his forties, started to gain recognition in his native country, while at the same time his career in England waned. On the one hand, high-profile concerts and mention of his work in English press became less frequent. In 2002, English critic John L. Walters, in his review of Alvarez's saxophone quartet *Accordion of Broken Hearts* (*Acordión de corazones rotos*) (1994), described the composer as "underrated."[92] On the other hand, shortly after establishing a solid reputation in Europe, Alvarez began

[86] Daniela Di Desidero, email to Alejandro Basulto, March 23, 2020.
[87] City and Guilds of London Art School, Daniela Di Desidero, higher diploma in postgraduate studies, issued in June 1996. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[88] Islington Registration Register, Javier Alvarez and Daniela Di Desidero, marriage certificate, number 591965. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[89] Di Desidero, email to Basulto.
[90] General Register Officie, Tobias Alvarez Di Desidero, birth certificate, no. DAF 177665. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[91] General Register Officie, Magali Alvarez Di Desidero, birth certificate, no. QBDAB 542046. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[92] John L. Walters, "Friday Review: On the Edge," *The Guardian,* June 28, 2002.

to gain recognition from important Mexican institutions. In 1993, the Xalapa Symphony Orchestra performed Alvarez's percussion concerto *Music for Drum and Steel Pan* (*Música para piel y palangana*) (1993) at the international festival Europalia.[93] The same year, the composer became part of the first generation of the newly created Mexican National System for Art Creators (Sistema Nacional de Creadores de Arte, SNCA), which provided Alvarez with a monthly stipend to create a long-term artistic project.[94] In 2000, the Mexican National Council of the Arts and the Domecq Cultural Institute awarded him the Mozart Medal for his artistic achievements.[95]

Ironically, although Alvarez ultimately became a familiar name in Mexican concert music circles, several of the pieces that made him relevant in Europe and the United States have yet to be performed in Mexico. While accessible and less demanding works like *Temazcal* and *Metro Chabacano* are regularly performed in Mexican concert halls, more demanding pieces like *Papalotl, Mannam*, and *Burn Your Boats* remain largely unperformed and known only through recordings.[96]

It remains unclear why Alvarez's presence in European new music circles diminished during the late 1990s and early 2000s. One explanation may be that he spent the better part of that time working on a project that never materialized—it took the

[93] "Archive: Mexico," Europalia Arts Festival, accessed on September 23, 2020, https://europalia.eu/en/archive/1993.
[94] José Luis Martínez Hernández, Executive Secretary of the National System of Art Creators, letter to the members of the National System of Creators, National Fund for the Arts, October 9, 1996. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[95] Elda Maceda, "Los reconocen con la medalla Mozart," *El universal,* October 4, 2000,
[96] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.

composer over a decade to compose his opera *Mambo* (1989-2001).[97] Described by its authors as a "study of the nature of… nostalgia… and a reflection on our modernity and our relationship with the past,"[98] this ninety-minutes long opera, with a libretto by Australian singer and writer Robyn Archer (b. 1948), is Alvarez's most ambitious project to date. Although both Alvarez and Archer received the support of several institutions to create the opera, including the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Hinrichsen Foundation, they were not able to secure a performance of the work. At any rate, Alvarez's rising profile in his native country prompted the composer to return home.

In 2004, after twenty-two years in London, Alvarez moved back to Mexico, where he became the head of important music institutions. The composer and his family relocated to Merida, Alvarez's father's birthplace, in the Yucatan peninsula. Domingo Rodriguez Semerena, director of the Cultural Institute of Yucatan (Instituto de Cultura de Yucatan, ICY), invited Alvarez to design the academic program of the music department of the newly created Superior Art School of Yucatan (Escuela Superior de Artes de Yucatán, ESAY). Rodriguez Semerena later asked Alvarez to become the first director of the ESAY music department.[99] In an interview, Alvarez explains that his main motivation was to have "students in his own country."[100]

Alvarez was able to negotiate a relatively generous salary and working condition. He received Mex$ 100,000 (roughly $10,000 in current currency) to design the program

[97] "Javier Alvarez," B.R.A.H.M.S: Database of Composers, IRCAM, accessed Febraury 7, 2021, http://brahms.ircam.fr/javier-alvarez.
[98] Javier Alvarez, *Mambo,* Score, 2001, unpublished, 1. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[99] Maria Rosa Acosta Aragón, "Amor por un proyecto," *Diario de Yucatán,* August 10, 2004.
[100] Claudia Sierra Media, "En música el talento no basta," *Diario de Yucatán,* May 19, 2006. ("Quería tener alumnos en mi propio país.")

and a monthly salary of Mex$ 40,758 (roughly $4,000 in current currency).[101] However, Alvarez's first tenure at the ESAY was short-lived—on September 12, 2007, he resigned.

In 2007, Alvarez was appointed Dean of the Conservatory of the Roses (Conservatorio de las Rosas, CR) in the state of Michoacan. He began work on the first day of 2008.[102] Alvarez envisioned substantial changes in the CR curriculum. In 2010, Alvarez, in partnership with the newly created Mexican Center for Music and Sonic Arts (Centro Mexicano para la Música y las Artes Sonoras, CMMAS), pioneered the creation of a bachelor's degree in composition geared toward the use of new technologies.[103] Unfortunately Alvarez's changes to the CR's curriculum were not well received. Furthermore, Alvarez faced institutional turmoil during his tenure, where a newly created union constantly confronted the school's board and leadership. As a result, Alvarez's tenure as CR's dean was brief. In 2011, Alvarez returned to ESAY in Merida, where he currently serves as the Dean.

Shortly after his return to Mexico, Alvarez became the recipient of Mexico's highest honors for an artist. In 2005, he became a member of the National Academy of the Arts. In 2013, he was awarded the Mexican National Award for Sciences and Arts, Mexico's highest honor for scientists and artists, for his "outstanding national and international career as a composer and founder of

[101] Yucatan State Goverment, Cultural Institue of Yucatan, Legal Agreement with Javier Alvarez, Agreement ID: DA-Dj-CA-031-047-04, August 2, 2001; Superior Art School of Yucatan, Legal Agreement with Javier Alvarez, Agreement ID: 001, September 12, 2005. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.
[102] Erick Alba, "Germán Romero dejará la rectoría," *La jornada Michoacán,* December 13, 2007.
[103] Oscar Cid de León, "Entra a conservatorio la enseñanza digital; academizan en Morelia las nuevas tecnologías. Institución instaura, a nivel licenciatura, estudios y composición en nuevas tecnologías," *Reforma*, January 13, 2010.

cultural projects."[104] In 2016, he became an emeritus creator of the SNCA, which entitles him to a monthly stipend for the rest of his life to create art.[105]

Since the early 2000s, Alvarez has had the opportunity to work with important Mexican and international orchestras. In 2002, the Xalapa Symphony Orchestra commissioned and performed *Foliated Geometry* (*Geometria foliada*) for string quartet and orchestra. In 2012, the French National Radio Orchestra and Florent Jodelet commissioned and performed Alvarez's second percussion concerto, *Gardens with Palms* (*Jardines con Palmera*). In 2013, the Mineria Symphony Orchestra commissioned Alvarez to write *From Here to the Weather Vane* (*De aqui a la veleta*), and in 2016, the Jalisco Philarmonic commissioned Alvarez's *Metal of Shamrocks* (*Metal de tréboles*), which was included in the orchestra's tour of Germany and the United States. In 2017, the Aguascalientes Symphony Orchestra commissioned Alvarez's clarinet concerto, *Illusions Merchant* (*Vendedor de ilusiones*). In 2018, Mexico's Pan-American University commissioned Alvarez's orchestral curtain raiser *And the Machine Keeps Going* (*Y la máquina va*) and the San Diego Symphony commissioned and performed Alvarez's orchestral cantata *Arms of Mist* (*Brazos de niebla*).

[104] Secretariat of Public Education, *Press Release 179: La SEP da a conocer los ganadores del premio nacional de ciencias y artes 2013,* November 22, 2013, accessed on September 23, 2020, https://www.gob.mx/sep/prensa/comunicado-179-la-sep-da-a-conocer-los-ganadores-del-premio-nacional-de-ciencias-y-artes-2013.
[105] "Sistema nacional de creadores," Fondo nacional para la cultura y las artes, accesed on September 23, 2020, https://fonca.cultura.gob.mx/blog/programa/sistema-nacional-de-creadores-de-arte/.

Stylistic Overview

General Considerations

Alvarez's output is vast and eclectic; he has written orchestral and chamber works, electroacoustic and electronic pieces, sound installations, and opera and vocal music, as well as music for film and advertising. Throughout his career, Alvarez has favored the use of unusual instrumental combinations and non-traditional instruments over the use of more traditional approaches. Early on, he primarily composed electroacoustic pieces (for solo instruments and tape) and purely acoustic works for small chamber ensembles. This music was usually composed with specific virtuoso performers in mind, and therefore the technical demands are extreme—requiring highly proficient musicians who often played in prestigious new music ensembles, such as the London Sinfonietta or the Ensemble Intercontemporain.[106] After returning to Mexico, Alvarez gradually began to write less demanding compositions. The composer also started favoring larger ensembles, such as orchestras, which are usually enriched with a large percussion battery.

According to musicologist Aurelio Tello, the foundation of Alvarez's technique is informed by early experimental and modern composers and not by traditional notions of tonal harmony, counterpoint, form, and music development. Furthermore, Tello explains that Alvarez's music is not programmatic but nonetheless is inspired by the composer's life experiences.[107] For example, in *A Model Kit* (*Modelo para armar*) (2000) in an unusual instrumental septet comprised of three saxophones, *jarana*, electric bass, and two

[106] Lourdes Turrent, "Un panorama de la música desde Gran Bretaña: entrevista al compositor Javier Alvarez," *Pauta* 42, no. 3, (April-June 1992): 29.
[107] Aurelio Tello, "Javier Alvarez compositor: la inefable certeza de los sonoro," program book for *Javier Álvarez: progresión.* Casete: agricultura digital, 2013, CD. CAS-2014-00029.

percussionists, the composer describes a chaotic visit to the Mexican city of Morelia, with members of the Banda Elástica—the dedicatees of the work. One of the sections of the piece is titled "Curses and Traffic Jams" ("Mentadas y embotellamientos"), in which the composer uses a short melodic motive commonly used in Mexican culture to curse in order to recreate noises commonly heard in a messy Mexican traffic jam.

American composer Stephen Montague further describes Alvarez's style as a blend of Latin American and European traditions, and his harmonic language as "consonant without being tonal," while another composer, Gabriel Pareyón, similarly lists among Alvarez's traits the unique use of traditional instruments from different cultures, including maracas, shekere, steel pan, and kayagum.[108]

Alvarez often describes his overall style as eclectic, and credits rhythm and timbre as the foundation of his musical thinking.[109] He has also affirmed that his Mexican upbringing is just one of the many elements of his identity, as he regards nationalism as a useless stylistic limitation, favoring multiculturalism instead.[110]

Alvarez usually starts a composition by jotting down a general scheme of the work's sections and its durations. He later improvises on piano, guitar, or, as he says, "in some cases the staff paper."[111] The next several steps of the process are often done with the assistance of technology; early in his career he used a sequencer, and currently he uses a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW). Finally, he transcribes the information

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[108] Stephen Montague, "Javier Alvarez," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed January 26, 2020, http://www.grovemusic.com; Gabriel Pareyón, "Alvarez, Javier." *Diccionario de compositores mexicanos de música de concierto,* Vol. 1 (Mexico: Universidad Panamericana Press, 2006), 57.
[109] Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *La composición en México en el Siglo* XX, (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), 146-49.
[110] Jorge Alberto Alba Muñoz, "Problemática de identidad musical en el compositor mexicano: perspectivas de compositores contemporáneos," (BMus thesis, Conservatorio de las Rosas, Mexico, 2016), 50.
[111] *Los grandes de bellas artes*, season 1, chapter 6, "Javier Alvarez," directed by Alejandro Ramos Marín, Sistema Público de Radiodifusión del Estado de Mexicano.

captured in the sequencer or DAW onto paper or engraving software. He claims that music technology has liberated his music from the confines of the score.[112]

Alvarez often revises his work. In some cases the changes are major, to the point of changing the titles of previously performed pieces. That is the case of *Luz Caterpillar* for piano and tape, which would eventually become *Papalotl* for the same instrumentation.[113] In other cases, Alvarez has adapted electroacoustic pieces into purely instrumental works. *Burn Your Boats* was originally composed for mixed ensemble and electronics; the composer later revised the piece and transformed it into a purely acoustic work, although in this case he kept the same title.[114]

Student period

Alvarez's student period (1976-1984) reflects the influence of European high modernism and new instrumental techniques. Simultaneously, these works contain the many characteristic elements of later works, including polymeters, layering, ostinatos, and the use of unconventional instruments. Most of Alvarez's works from his student period suggest seriousness and strong academicism. For example, in his horn concerto, *Trireme*, Alvarez quickly swings from complex orchestral textures to intimate moments in which the solo horn plays long passages by itself. The orchestration is dense, and often obscures many of the subtleties and extended techniques that the composer uses in this score. The harmonies are harsh throughout, and allow few moments of contrast and rest. Whatever its shortcomings, the work also reveals a composer with a keen ear for timbre, texture, and melody.

[112] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[113] Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies," 14.
[114] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.

British Period

Temazcal is not only a milestone in Mexican music but also marks the end of Alvarez's formative period and the beginning of his mature style, what I will refer to as his British period (1984-2004). Different music scholars have pondered the importance of *Temazcal* in Mexican music history. Mexican musicologist Yolanda Moreno Rivas distinguished *Temazcal* as the beginning of Alvarez's new style, which she characterized by its "rhythmic plurality, the use of popular forms including models taken from pop and commercial music, and the electronic manipulation of the sound."[115] For Mexican-American musicologist Alejandro L. Madrid, Alvarez's success comes from blending his eclectic musical taste and Latino flavor with his expertise in electronic music; he describes *Temazcal* as "an abstract piece that slowly returns to its folk origins, until it is completely transformed, and every aspect of electronic sound disappears." [116] Latin-American musicologists Aurelio Tello and Ricardo Miranda, in their publication *La música en Latinoamérica*, recognize *Temazcal* as the first piece of Alvarez's new style and as "an early warning that Mexican music was breaking with the avant-garde postures of the 1960s."[117]

Alvarez's early days in London also coincide with the rise of neoliberalism. English commentator Tim Rutherford-Johnson argues that at the end of the twentieth century, artists and composers witnessed the "spread of neoliberal cultural policies, which were based on the principle that artworks should succeed or fail according to the

[115] Moreno Rivas, 110 ("La pluralidad rítmica, el uso de formas populares incluyendo modelos pop o comerciales y la manipulación sonora electroacústica por computadora.").
[116] Alejandro L. Madrid, "A Mexican Postmodernist Vision Grounded on Structuralism: The Cases of Juan Trigos' *Cuarteto Da Do* (1988) and Victor Rasgado's *Rayo Nocturnal* (1989)" (Master thesis, University of North Texas, Denton, 1999), 35-36.
[117] Aurelio Tello and Ricardo Miranda, *La música en Latinoamérica* (Mexico: Dirección General del Acervo Histórico Diplomático, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2011), 217 ("fue una de las tempranas advertencias de que la música mexicana rompía con las posturas de vanguardia de los años sesenta").

rules of the free market.… [and] encouraged the production of more accessible, populist forms of music."[118] Consequently, several composers working during this period, including Alvarez, adapted an entrepreneurial style as a response to the drastic reduction of public funding to the arts. However, while it is true that Alvarez embraced an accessible style, he always did it on his own terms.

Despite Alvarez's movement toward accessibility, the composer rarely employs traditional forms or harmonies, *Metro Chabacano* being the most notable exception. In an interview with this author, Alvarez acknowledges that *Metro Chabacano* is "an accident, an anomaly" in his catalog.[119] Yet, after composing the work, Alvarez began using a sequencer to compose most of his acoustic pieces, a procedure that has been employed by many minimalist composers; indeed, in his autobiography, John Adams argues that "much of the aesthetics of minimalism seemed… a response to the precise, regular, periodic behavior or machines, and particularly of electronic machines."[120] Alvarez's unique approach to repetition became one of the most noticeable traits of his British period.

The influence of American Minimalism as well as Afro-Cuban musical styles also characterize Alvarez's British period. Both influences are evident in works like *Burn Your Boats*. The work is inspired by phrases commonly found in Afro-Cuban and Latin jazz music, and its overall texture and compositional approach are heavily indebted to minimalism. Alvarez considers that minimalism helped him funnel his sympathies

[118] Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture Since 1989* (University of California Press, 2017), 32.
[119] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[120] John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), 200.

towards traditional concert music.[121] Furthermore, the opportunity to work with Adams, who invited him to the Ojai Festival and conducted his music in London, helped Alvarez to realize that he was not only drawn to complexity, but also to "a more open and repetitive language."[122] In addition, Alvarez's parents had exposed him to Afro-Cuban music at an early age. It is also worth noting that Alvarez took the title of the piece from a book by the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis, one of the poets that he read as a high school student.

Finally, Alvarez is not the first electroacoustic composer from Latin America to study and develop his career in a foreign country; as noted by Rutherford-Johnson, "the important electroacoustic music scene in South America has been built through a greater degree of two-way exchange [with wealthy countries]."[123] However, Alvarez's compositional style differs greatly from most early Latin American practitioners; for example, the work of Argentinian Mario Davidovsky (1934-2019), who held teaching positions at prestigious American private universities and pioneered electroacoustic works strongly influenced by 12-tone composition procedures, has little in common with Alvarez's music, whose work and career reflects London's multicultural landscape during the 1980s and 1990s and his Mexican upbringing.

Mexican Period

After his return to Mexico, in what might be called his Mexican period (2004-present), Alvarez switched his attention to writing for orchestras and more traditional forces. While the British period signals the discovery and development of Alvarez's

[121] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[122] Alvarez, interview by Basulto.
[123] Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall,* 134.

voice, the Mexican period reveals a composer who is more mature with a more polished technique. Compositions from this period have more streamlined textures and make subtler use of folk material. Yet, the composer's approach to form, harmony, and orchestration remained highly idiosyncratic.

Many of the orchestral works that the composer wrote during this period are concertos. The use of the orchestra often resembles the tape part of his early electroacoustic compositions. In addition, Alvarez relies heavily on percussion as an important element of his orchestral palette, or as the leading instrument.

It is important to note that during his Mexican period, Alvarez kept writing electronic music. However, he has increasingly favored acousmatic works (fixed media with no live performers involved) over electroacoustic ones.

In recent years, Alvarez also has incorporated social discourse in his music. Both his acousmatic work *It is Better to Die in the Jungle* (*Mejor morir en la selva*) (2016), and his orchestral cantata *Arms of Mist*, describe the struggle of Latin American migrants trying to cross the US border. However, true to his style, Alvarez addresses topic of migration in two very different ways. In *It is Better to Die in the Jungle* Alvarez samples and manipulates the sound of poisonous insects, firearms, and helicopters to reenact the sounds that many migrants hear during their journey through Darién Gap—a treacherous jungle located between Colombia and Panama, which is plagued by dangerous animals, drug-smugglers, and militia groups.[124] In *Arms of Mist*, Alvarez partnered with Chicano poet Juan Felipe Herrera (b. 1948), to create a work for narrator, boy soprano, four *vihuelas* (a traditional Mexican string instrument commonly used in mariachi music), and orchestra. In this particular work, Alvarez aimed to depict the "thoughts and feelings of

[124] Javier Alvarez, *It is Better to Die in the Jungle,* program notes. Privately held by Javier Alvarez.

an imaginary young immigrant child."[125] Both works reveal Alvarez's rich understanding of a complicated issue such as migration, either by rendering the dangers of the migration process itself or by describing the challenges of those who were born in a country that rejects them.

[125] Javier Alvarez, *Arms of Mist,* program notes, San Diego Symphony Orchestra, David Danzmyr conductor, November 1, 2, and 4, 2018, Jacobs Music Center, San Diego, California, accessed on April 19, 2021, https://www.sandiegosymphony.org/static/media/uploads/2018-19%20Season/PDF/jmw03_nov1_notes.pdf.

Metal of Hearts

History of the Piece

Metal of Hearts (2012) synthesizes many of the key elements of Alvarez's late style. The work emphasizes texture and color over harmony and melody and the overlapping instrumental lines suggest the influence of minimalism. The melodic writing strongly recalls free improvisation and jazz, and the orchestration reveals a composer who blends traditional orchestral forces (often played in an unconventional way) with a variety of musical instruments from different origins—such as a collection of blues harmonicas, congas, and so forth.

Furthermore, despite being a purely acoustic work, *Metal of Hearts* has an overall sound unmistakably reminiscent of the composer's electronic music, probably due to its use of extended techniques and rich percussion palette. In an interview with the music critic Juan Arturo Brennan, Alvarez described *Metal of Hearts* as*:*

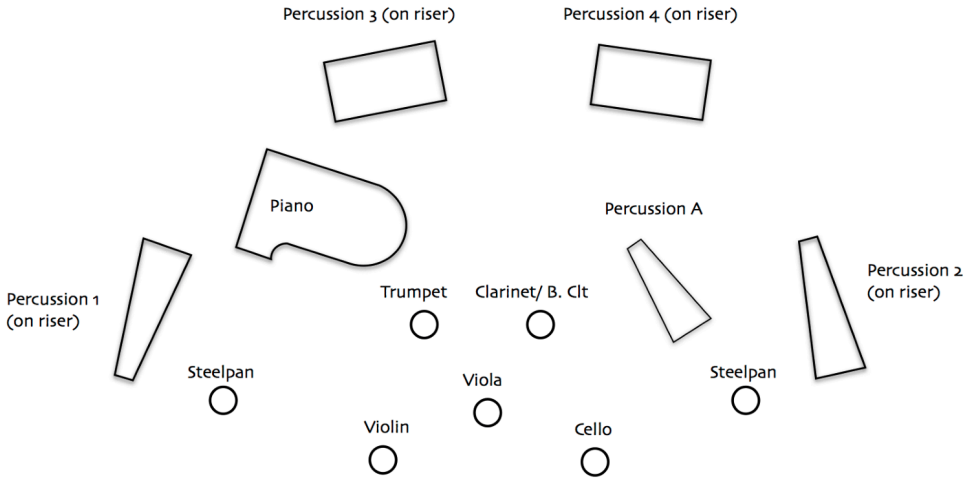
> Not an electroacoustic work and yet many of its sounds and much of its musical language stem from that genre.… This is an example of my goal with this project: that the listener appreciates, through my more recent pieces, how ideas and work produced over twenty-five years permeate my production today, and hence, to sense how I got to the point where I am now.[126]

The French new music ensemble TM Plus and the Mexican percussion quartet Tambuco joined forces to commission *Metal of Hearts*.[127] The instrumentation blends a percussion quartet with an instrumental septet: clarinet in B-Flat (doubling on bass

[126] Juan Arturo Brennan, "Grabaciones de ayer, hoy y mañana: hilos conductores en la discografía de Javier Álvarez," program book for *Javier Álvarez: Progresión,* (Casete: agricultura digital, 2013, CD. CAS-2014-00029): 60.
[127] "TM+ y Tambuco," Projects, TM+ Ensemble, accessed Febraury 14, 2021, http://www.tmplus.org/projet/tm-y-tambuco/.

clarinet), trumpet in C, violin, viola, cello, an additional percussion, and piano. Alvarez carefully specifies the location of the musicians on stage, particularly the location of the two steel pans. As we will see below, Alvarez sets up the ensemble the same way an audio engineer carefully pans the instruments in an audio mix.

Figure 1: Stage Plan



Characteristics Features and Prominent Elements

Metal of Hearts calls for over forty different percussion and miscellaneous instruments. While some of those instruments are common to traditional orchestral music, like the bass drum, others are usually associated with different types of global music. Several of those instruments are used in Caribbean music (like the guiro, bongos, congas, steel pans, *marímbula*, and cowbell), while others are of South American origins (including the Peruvian *cajón* and the Brazilian *berimbau*). However, the most unusual elements of the percussion arsenal are the six different blues harmonicas, commonly used in African American music. Although one may argue that the blues harmonicas belong to

the wind instruments family, Alvarez asks the percussionists to play them along with percussion instruments.

In addition, Alvarez calls for unusual techniques that are often associated with popular music. For example, the string players are asked to play *chicharra*, which means to play with the bow between the bridge and the tailpiece to create a pitchless percussive effect, a technique frequently associated with the Argentinian tango.

In program notes to the piece, Alvarez explains that by mixing all these unrelated instruments and unconventional playing techniques, he attempts to "help the listener to make free associations and to establish unforeseen relationships [to] organize the work in [their] own imagination."[128]

As happens with most of Alvarez's pieces for chamber ensemble, *Metal of Hearts* is a through-composed single movement composition. The work is divided into four main sections that are played without interruption. The first section, marked "Mecanirónico" (a play on words in Spanish that roughly translates to "mechanic and ironic"), sets a mysterious mood in which a complex web of independent layers supports a leaping melody played first on the trumpet and later on the piano. The second section, marked "Rápido" (Spanish for fast), opens with a percussion bridge orchestrated for several instruments commonly associated with Afro-Cuban music (bongos, congas, and cowbell) and continues with a juxtaposition of contrasting ideas and jazzy melodies. Built around an undulating minor third ostinato, the third section is marked quarter note equals eighty. The fourth section, labeled "Cómodo" (Spanish for comfortable), begins with a percussion bridge, in which the strings and piano emulate the scraping sound of four

[128] Javier Alvarez, *Metal of Hearts*, program notes, Aura New Music Ensemble, Moores Opera House, November 16, 2015, Houston, Texas.

guiros. To conclude the piece, Alvarez builds momentum by repeating a syncopated phrase in almost all the instruments.

Table 1: Sections of *Metal of Hearts*

Section	Measures	Tempo Marking	Metronomic Marking
First	1-35	Mecanirónico	Quarter equals 52
Second	36-165	Rápido	Quarter equals 120
Third	166-228	None	Quarter equals 80
Fourth	229-335	Cómodo	Quarter equals 52

The teleology of Alvarez's music is propelled by motion and rhythm, not by harmony. In other words, while he decisively writes compositions that "compel a feeling of things moving, of time passing,"[129] most of that motion comes the rhythmic drive, not from harmonic tension. Consequently, Alvarez's harmonic choices may seem odd or chaotic to someone accustomed to music characterized by traditional approaches to consonance and dissonance.

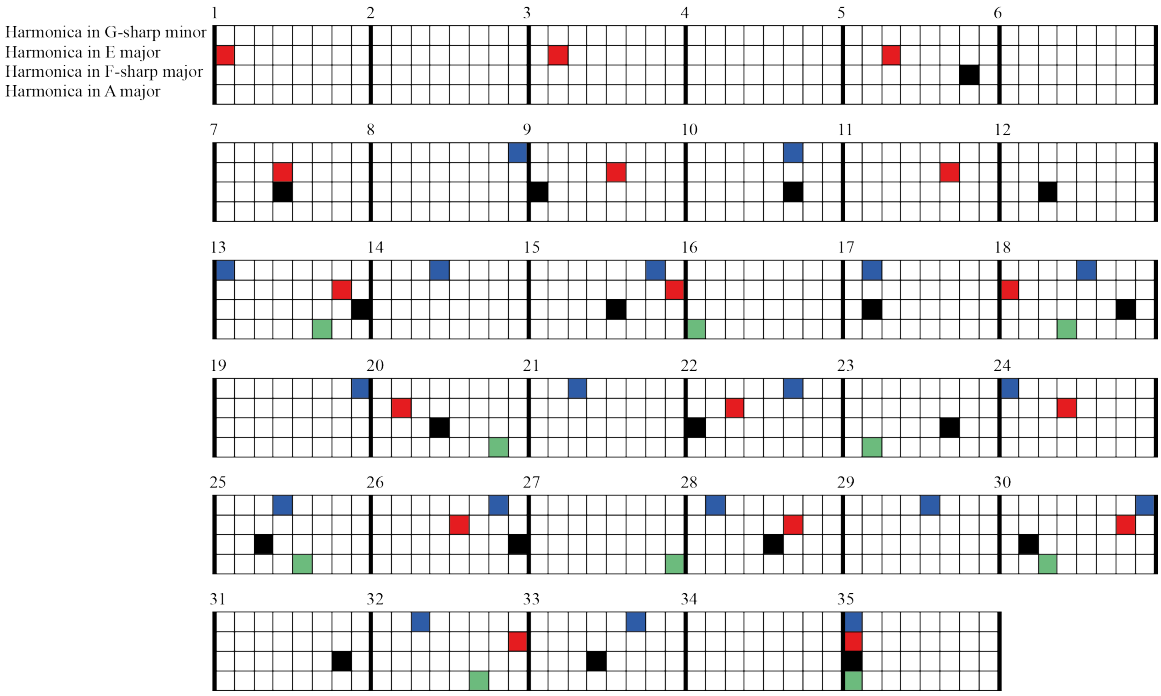
Although Alvarez often employs tertian and quartal harmonies, he does not rely on fixed scales or harmonic progressions as the foundation of his harmonic language. In his doctoral dissertation, Alvarez explains that he creates his harmonies by composing a reduced number of chords, from which he derives most of his materials. Furthermore, he conceives of the harmonies and the rhythmic patterns as separate entities, and he blends them together later in the process.[130] While it remains unclear if the composer uses the

[129] Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies," 4.
[130] Alvarez, "Compositional Strategies," 14-24.

same procedure in *Metal of Hearts,* some chords are repeated throughout the composition.

Layering overlapping blues harmonica patterns provides the opening section's structural foundation. The opening section gradually builds tension by layering different elements—a technique often used by John Adams.[131] However, unlike other minimalist composers, Alvarez's overlapping layers are not based on the same harmonic material, but on independent harmonic content—each harmonica is tuned to a different diatonic scale. This technique is used throughout the piece. In other words, regardless of the specific collection played by an instrument or group of instruments, in *Metal of Hearts* there is usually more than one pitch collection sounding at the same time.

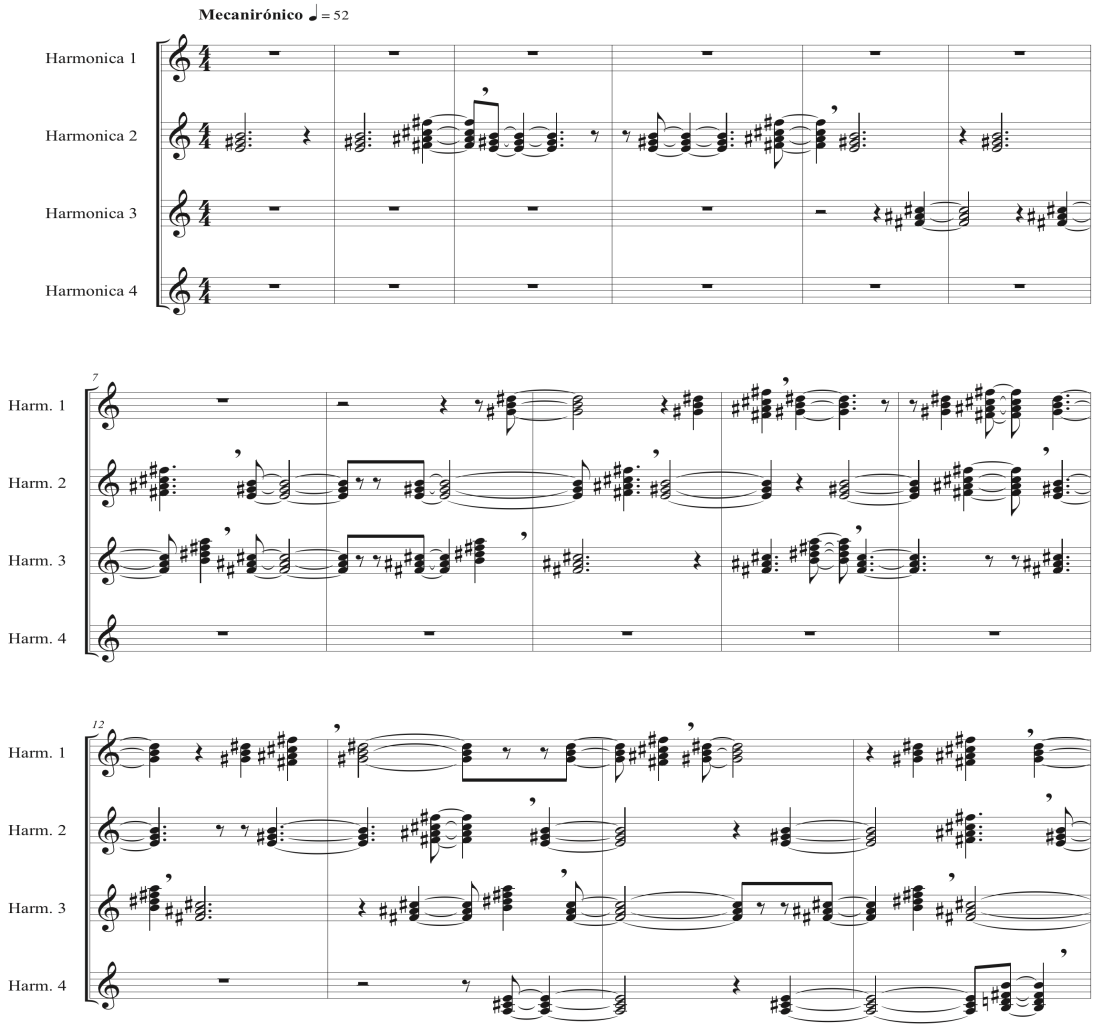
Figure 2: Overlapping harmonica layers



[131] John Adams, Rebecca Jemian, and Ann Marie de Zeeuw, "An Interview with John Adams," *Perspective of New Music* 34, No. 2 (Summer 1996): 96.

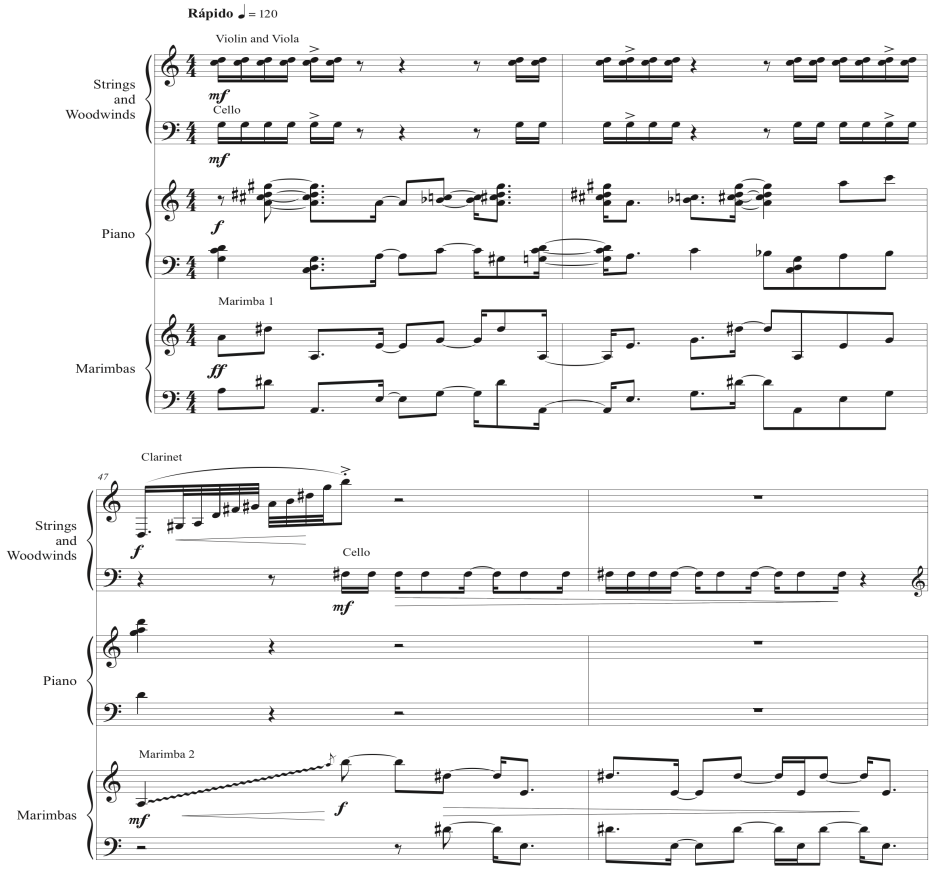
Each of the four patterns share the same characteristics—two root-position chords (in the tonic of the scale in which the harmonica is tuned) performed by exhaling are followed by a different chord performed by inhaling. However, all the harmonica patterns have different lengths and start at different points. The opening section concludes in measure thirty-five, where all the patterns line up on the downbeat of the bar. This compositional strategy is clearly reminiscent of minimalism.

Example 1: Overlapping harmonica layers in mm.1-15 of *Metal of Hearts* [Breathing marks added by the author]. Reduction made by the author, only the harmonica's music.



At measure forty-five, the juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas creates what music theorist Edward T. Cone described as "points of interruption."[132] Cone coined the term to describe Stravinsky's sudden and dramatic changes in musical content and texture. Alvarez uses a similar strategy to build up momentum by opposing two contrasting ideas. The first idea takes place in measures forty-five and forty-six and is characterized by a repeated chord on the strings, while the second idea starts with a swooping arpeggio in the clarinet, accompanied by a marimba glissando, in the next two bars.

Example 2: Points of interruptions in mm. 45-48 of *Metal of Hearts* (reduction).

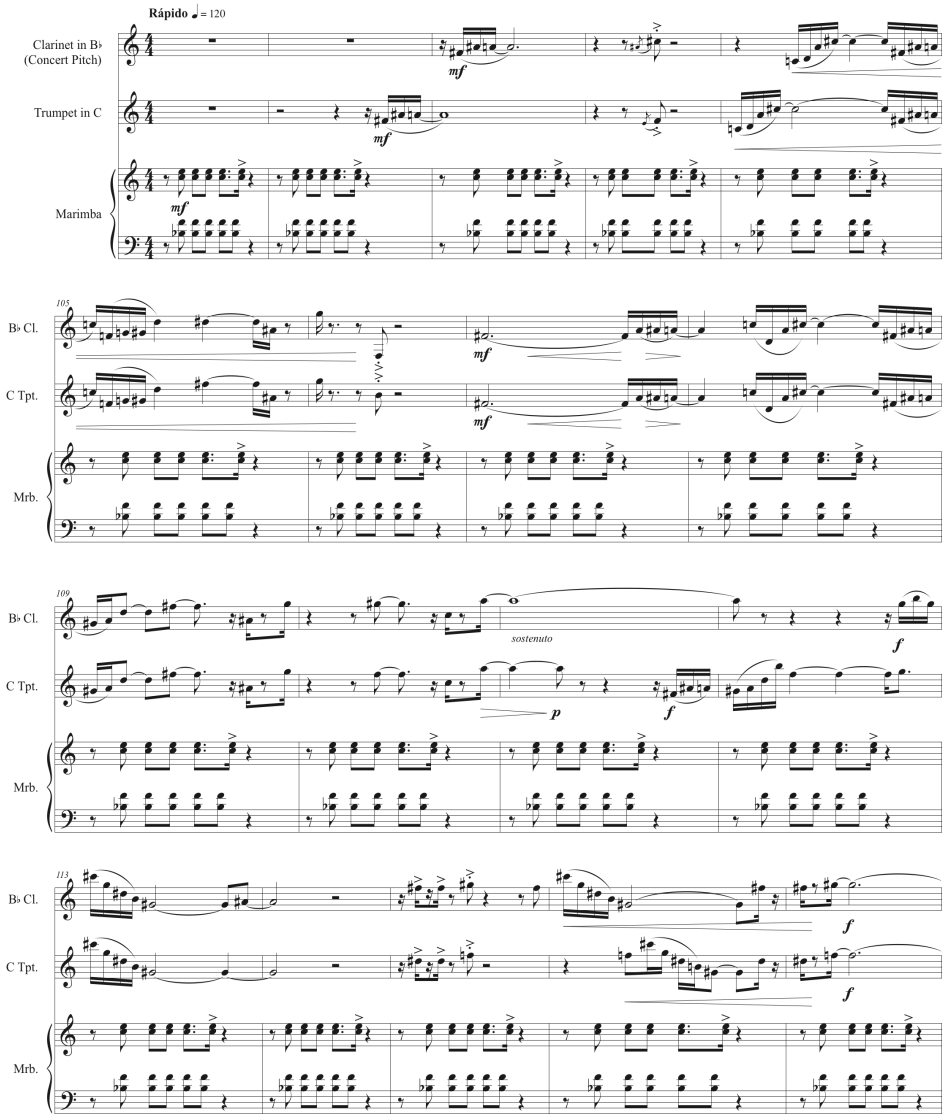


[132] Edward T. Cone, "Stravinksy: The Progress of a Method," *Perspectives of New Music* 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1962): 18-20.

In the same example it is possible to appreciate another of the composer's techniques. Alvarez often enriches melodies by stacking complex chords over simple melodic lines. As shown in the above example, the piano adds chromatic quartal harmonies to a syncopated marimba line.

Alvarez's melodic writing often resembles improvised jazz melodies. In measure one hundred, the trumpet and the clarinet perform a whimsical melody over a steady marimba ostinato. While other elements are part of the busy texture, the trumpet and clarinet clearly have the leading role. However, while the melodic line played by clarinet and trumpet is mostly performed in unison, they are not entirely together. The subtle interplay between both instruments is reminiscent of jazz practices.

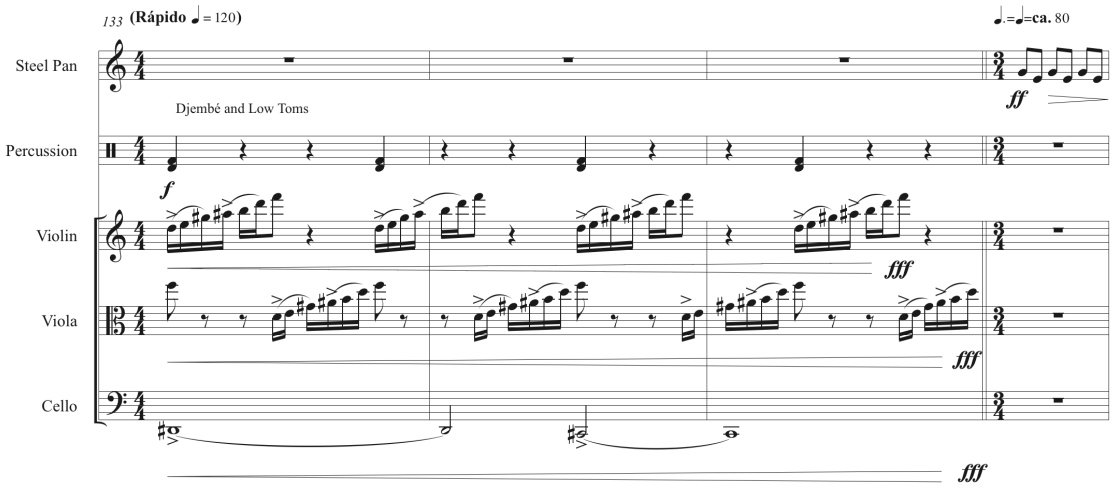
Example 3: Jazzy melodic writing in mm. 100-117 of *Metal of Hearts* (reduction).



Alvarez uses two types of devices to transition from one section to another. When the tempo moves from slow to fast, the composer simply indicates an *accelerando* marking shortly before the new tempo. When the tempo changes from fast to slow, Alvarez employs a metric modulation that it is carefully prepared a few bars before the transition. Music theorist George Peter Tingley describes metric modulation as "a precise

and controlled method of proceeding from one metronomic speed to another."[133] Alvarez concocts every metric modulation by alternating a succession of phrases that foreshadow the tempo change; in other words, Alvarez prepares the new tempo before the actual tempo change takes place. For example, in measures 133 to 135, Alvarez accents every three sixteenth notes in the violins and violas; the rhythmic value of those sixteenth notes eventually become identical to the eighth note in bar 136 onwards.

Example 4: Metric modulation in mm. 133-137 of *Metal of Hearts* (reduction).

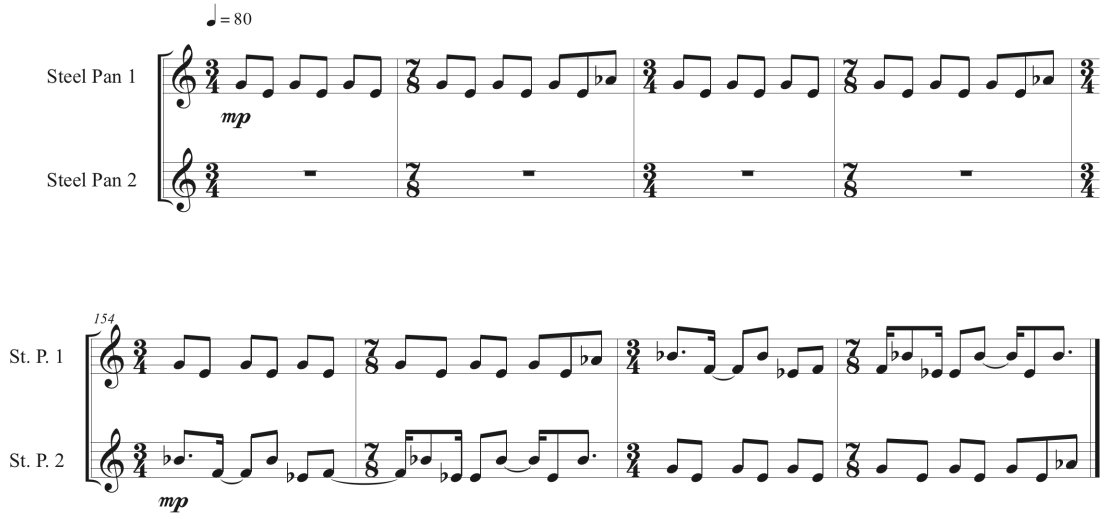


Most of the third section of the piece is based on an oscillating ostinato played by two steel pans and later by the piano. However, this musical element is modified shortly after it is introduced. Example five illustrates how Alvarez energizes the ostinato by adding a second steel pan that plays a similar, although much more syncopated line. By juxtaposing the syncopated phrase against the original ostinato, Alvarez reduces the monotony of the original material and adds rhythmic tension. Furthermore, since both

[133] George Peter Tingley, "Metric Modulation and Elliott Carter's 'First String Quartet,'" *Indiana Theory Review* 4, No. 1 (Spring 1981): 3.

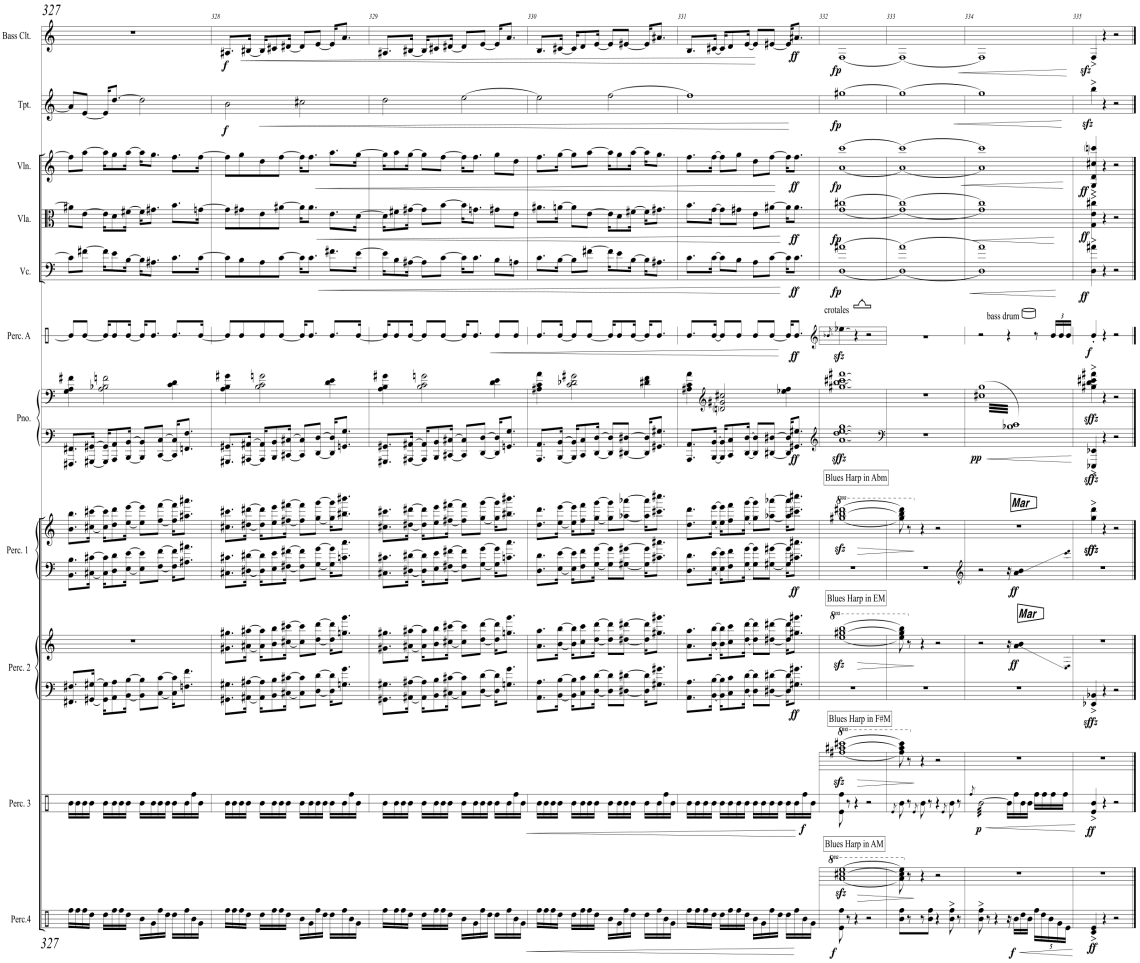
steel pans are in opposing places of the stage, the composer creates the illusion of movement and space, similar to when audio engineers pan the sound from one point to another in a stereo mix.

Example 5: Energizing an ostinato in mm. 150-157 of *Metal of Hearts* (reduction).



Alvarez creates the climatic ending of the piece by overlapping syncopated phrases. Gradually different instruments reinforce the syncopated phrase, which moves steadily higher in register as the section progresses. Towards the end of the section, in measure 331, we find one of the few instances that resemble a rhythmic unison. One may argue that in Alvarez's music, rhythmic uniformity is the closest thing to a perfect authentic cadence in tonal music.

Example 6: Repeated overlapping phrases in mm. 327-335 of *Metal of Hearts* (full score).



Conclusion

Alvarez's upbringing gave him the tools and opportunities to embrace his Mexican identity and also the richness of other cultures. Early in life, he showed the talent, determination, and curiosity that would help him to have a career as a composer. While his musical education was somewhat traditional, Alvarez was able to carve a unique compositional voice through his studies abroad, his love for popular and folk music, and his keen interest in technology. His work *Temazcal* suggested a completely novel and groundbreaking way to use folkloric material in concert music. This new approach is not nostalgic nor simplistic; quite the opposite, he uses his own national identity as one of many elements of an idiosyncratic and cutting-edge style.

Later in his career, Alvarez blended years of experience writing electronic, electroacoustic, and acoustic pieces in works like *Metal of Hearts*. In these pieces, we find a mature composer still willing to experiment and try new things. This fascinating mix of experience and daringness is what makes the music from this period so unique. Alvarez never compromises his imagination; as he recently stated in a TV interview: "I want to keep experimenting. I don't want to tie myself to a single style or type of work. I acknowledge that there is a generation of successful composers that have settled their musical style. Not me, I am still willing to make mistakes."[134]

While Alvarez's early works are praised because they signaled a new path to many young Mexican composers, his later pieces are equally fascinating and deserve the attention of audiences, performers, and scholars. I hope that this document will help to

[134] *Los grandes de bellas artes*. ("Yo quiero seguir experimentando. No me quiero atar a un estilo o una pieza. Reconozco que en mi generación que hay compositores de éxito que se han comprometido con un estilo de música. Yo no, yo sigo dispuesto a cometer errores.")

encourage more people to discover the wealth of Alvarez's complete catalog, especially his later works.

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