

## **Valentín Surif at Bolivar Hall, London, England - 8 December, 2006**

The concluding concert of ILAMS' 2006 Ginastera Festival brought together a diverse, yet inter-connected group of Argentine composers, presented to an enthusiastic Bolivar Hall audience by the distinguished pianist Valentín Surif.

Valentín is perhaps better known in the UK through his remarkable ground-breaking recordings on Marco Polo/ Naxos of the piano music of Alberto Williams. Yet familiarity with these recordings did not adequately prepared anyone for his powerful stage persona, as he brought alive this relatively unfamiliar music, not only by his depth of knowledge, but his passion and commitment.

This was the second time in the festival that we had the opportunity to appraise Williams' music and though much of it was being given its London première, now with some growing familiarity with his style, one was able to glimpse the man's stature and why he was so widely regarded in Europe and America. Although this music was borne out of the prevailing late 19th Century Central-European romantic style, Williams never sought to merely imitate his illustrious contemporaries. He had an endearing love of pictorially-inspired tone pictures and as a pioneer, brought into the concert-hall characteristic Argentine rhythms and forms. All this and more was brilliantly evoked by Valentín Surif, who blew away the fog of 100 years and the misconception that the absence of nationalistic colour in some of his music does not dim the man's genius.

Shady Hill and the episodic, Poem of the Night were full-blooded romantic evocations. The broadly rhapsodic melody of the former piece was a glorious opening to the concert, tinted with pellucid phrases that warmly evoked past summers, fondly recalled. A glorious Lisztian passion imbued the lovely Berceuse, Op 47, No.1, which could also be felt in the Poem of the Night. In this expansive work we were taken on an imaginary landscape: bells sounded in the night before moonlit shadows flitted across Valentín's expressive keyboard, and nocturnal calm gave way to stormy clouds, and the distant tolling bell. Performed with such singular affection and maturity, this music sounded glorious and deserved to be heard more widely.

Juan Angel Ciurleo is better known for his choral conducting, but over the years has developed a modest but very well written corpus of his own music. Composed over the last few years, his 3 Tangos, Op 14 were given their London première. The opening piece has a quixotic, quirky and unsettling rhythm. Not music to dance to, but very effectively written and expressive, captured perfectly by the effervescent Valentín Surif. The second piece had great power and vigour, conjuring the spirit and ardour of the dance but ended cleverly, teasing the listener. The final tango was as brilliantly written as its predecessors and rounded off the group in style. Afterwards the composer was called to the platform to acknowledge the appreciative applause.

The stage in the second half was turned to full advantage as we were given the opportunity to appraise a very effectively conceived musico-dramatic work by the very wonderful Alicia Terzian. A pupil of Ginastera, she is an inspired musician, academic and composer, who embraces the wide diversity of her country's cultures. In "Buenos Aires you are killing me" she brings together the pianist, with 2 narrators (the actors Omar Sánchez Camarena and Frederic Wickert) and taped sound (ably operated by Morgan Szymanski) not forgetting optional props, ie table, chairs, newspapers and

bottle of wine! Also heard for the first time in London, this work brilliantly conveys the isolation of modern life, as relevant to Buenos Aires as to London. Using the minimal props and a thoroughly modern musical idiom, the two men are seated next to a table, each reading a newspaper using speech to indicate their separate train of thoughts, on certain topics. This is done to the backdrop of the piano's musical commentary, which employs a wide range of techniques to achieve the required sounds, and the pre-recorded sounds, which included a singer, speakers and the noise of the city. The impact of the performance was very immediate and with so many visual and aural incidents, the effect was mesmeric. The performers were superb and their timing immaculate. The random elements of the piece conveyed the craziness that is very true to modern life. Sitting at the table of a pavement café will never be the same!

Sanity was restored with the return of the solo piano in 3 pieces by the festival composer, Alberto Ginastera. The attractive Rondo on Argentine Childrens' Folk Tunes was written for the composer's children in 1947 and incorporates some popular nursery tunes. The simplicity of the music was captured to perfection by Valentín. This was succeeded by the earlier Malambo, which is characteristic of the composer's motoric style, brimming with vivacious energy. The rarely heard Piano Sonata No.3 was the last work that the composer completed in 1982. It is quite shocking in its power and intensity, lasting about 5 minutes. Ginastera telescoped everything into this concentrated one-movement sonata, which is redolent in form to the baroque sonatas of Scarlatti. In form it breaks down into two sections, with an extended coda, whilst the music blends the composer's late harmonic style with the driving rhythms encountered in his earlier piano music. Played with great intensity, this versatile pianist demonstrated once more his mastery of a wide range of styles and musics.

The evening was rounded off with some encores taking us into a gentler harmonic world. Carlos Guastavino's Sonatina is a particularly delight piece and was given a performance that radiated the music's innate serenity.

*Ray Picot*